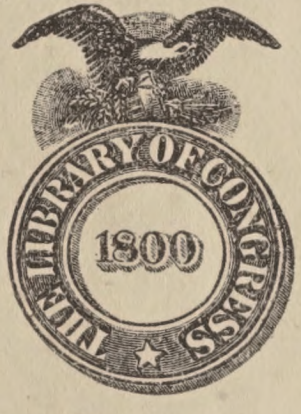
Two-Gun Sue

Douglas Grant



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TWO-GUN SUE

BY

DOUGLAS GRANT

Author of "The Single Track," etc.

Ostrander, Isabel E

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TWO-GUN SUE

CHAPTER I

NIPPED WIRES

"TAKIN' 'em by and large, there ain't a female in the county can ride like our gals of the Circle Six!" Tad Mason stretched out his short, plump legs in the shade of the bunk-house wall and watched with admiring approval the slim, graceful figure loping out through the ranch gate. "The little one just sits that there bronc like she was part of it."

"She shore does," Link Dole agreed, but without enthusiasm, as he shifted his quid from one cadaverous cheek to the other. "She'll be ridin' out to meet that Easterner again, the one that's stayin' down to the Central Hotel. Beats all how they'll take to somethin' different, don't it? Ever sence that dance over to the Bar D, where this Chanler hombre showed her them new steps, it looks like us punchers wasn't no more account than a bunch of yearlin' shorthorns to Miss Sylvie!"

"Oh, well, it ain't often anythin' as citified as him drifts out to a cow-town, Link, and fur as we know there ain't nothin' agin him," Tad remarked easily. "He looks you square in the eye when he talks and though he don't go moseyin' around with no chip on his shoulder there's a set to him as if he could take care of hisself when it comes to a little mix-up."

"What's he here *fur*, anyways?" Link spat copiously, and a nondescript dog who had been hovering about ingratiatingly betook himself out of range in haste. "He ain't after cows or white-face and he don't 'pear to be a lunger, while as fur ranchin', the Triangle Four has been on the market sence Jed Price died and he ain't even looked it over. It ain't noways likely that he's stayin' at the Central Hotel fur the sake of the grub and the p'ints of interest around Dexter. Folks usually declar' theirselves one way or t'other in these parts."

"S'pose you ast him, if you're so plumb cur'us!" Tad rose as a grizzled, weatherbeaten individual sauntered around the corner of the bunkhouse. "Clint in yet from ridin' line, Wes?"

Wes Hayward, foreman of the Circle Six, shook his head, but turned once more to scan the grassy, rolling plain before he replied.

"No. Don't expect him back before sundown,

but it's Lee I'm studyin' 'bout. I told the kid there was enough of the boys to ride line without him takin' things into his own hands, especially now that there's bad blood between him and Jake Brower, but he allowed he was boss of the ranch and he warn't afeerd of Jake and his pack of thievin', rustlin' greasers. He's just naterally brash and lookin' for trouble."

"Ole Man Poindexter wouldn't have dodged any that was goin', and his boy ain't likely to," Tad observed. "He always was a game little cuss, but I thought that college would have put kid-glove, la-de-dah idees in his head. It ain't, though, not a mite; he wants to take holt, that's all."

"He ain't no more boss of the Circle Six than his sisters are, and Miss Susanna leaves everything to you, Wes. You've been runnin' the ranch ever since the three of them was knee-high to a coyote; why don't you speak to Miss Sue if the kid's hankerin' after a show-down with Jake and his bunch?" demanded Link.

"Because I aim to keep him out of trouble without tattlin' to his sisters." Wes scratched his head reflectively. "You two boys are the only ones of the outfit who was here in the Old Man's day, and you know, same's I do, how his fool notions 'bout breedin' fancy cows ate up all he

could borrow on the land. Last year's drought kind of got us behindhand with the interest, that and keepin' the kid in college, and that lawyer feller down to Mammon City has been pesterin' Miss Sue again. She's got enough on her hands, and I ain't goin' to worry her none about Lee; if I can't keep him from a run-in with Jake and his outfit there's nothin' she could say to him."

"There ain't been no more rustlin' than in other years, and nothin' to connect up Jake and his greasers with it, 'ceptin' that talk of Rosa del Rio's after Felix Mesega give her the go-by." Tad's good-natured face had lengthened into lugubrious lines. "It's a plumb, almighty shame 'bout Miss Sue havin' everythin' on her shoulders, scratchin' dirt to put the kid through college and learnin' Miss Sylvie all she got herself from those two years' schoolin' in Kansas City where her Pa sent her that time. Jumpin' snakes! I'd turn rustler myself if it would help her keep the Circle Six."

"There ain't no question of losin' the ranch." Link's habitual drawl quickened with emphasis and he turned to the foreman suddenly. "Wes, you been hearin' anythin' 'bout that hombre from the East who's stayin' down to the Central Hotel?"

"Cain't say as I have," Wes responded cau-

tiously, and his shrewd, kindly eyes narrowed. "I've seen him lookin' on in Faro Jim's oncet or twice but he wasn't playin'. What you been hearin' 'bout him?"

"Nothin', nor nobody else. He's kinder took up with some of the Bar D outfit, but the sucker's such a bum rider that his pants acshully fit him." Link spat once more in supreme contempt. "Chanler, his name is, and he allows to come from New York, but that's every livin' thing he's let on 'bout hisself. He ambles off every day on one of Sim Moser's broncs, but nobody savvies where, lessen it's to look at the scen'ry. What's he doin' 'round Dexter, anyways?"

"Link's afeered he's nosin' 'roun our corral," chuckled Tad. "Miss Sylvie ain't had eyes for none of us sence she met up with him at the Bar D dance, and it's only nateral, for she's known us all her life, and there ain't a man-jack of us that she ain't been able to wrop 'round her finger from the time she could sit her first pinto. She's plumb tickled 'cause he treats her as if she was a growed-up young lady and I suspicion she'd like to rope him and then turn him loose agin, just to show she can; gals acts thataway mostly."

"A heap you savvy 'bout 'em!" Link snorted. "They's plenty of likely young ones in this county

without Miss Sylvie ropin' no strange maverick. What's that?''

He had jumped to his feet and now the foreman wheeled and followed the direction of his gaze.

''It's Clint!'' the latter exclaimed. ''Clint, and he's a-comin' hell-for-Sunday. Somethin's broke loose.''

The puff of white dust upon the road had spread into a swirling cloud and from it materialized the form of a rider bent low over the neck of his running horse, whose sudden, wild spurts indicated the dig of spurs. Tad made one leap in the direction of the corral and then paused, and all three men waited until the horse swerved in at the gate and drew up on sliding haunches before them.

''Wire's down over beyond the crick,'' the rider announced breathlessly. ''They was o. k. at sundown——.''

''Ground ain't trompled none?'' Wes interrupted tersely.

''Only on t'other side and the trail leads north.'' Clint Beckett's good-looking, boyish face was set in grim lines. ''Moreover, them wires ain't tore loose; they been nipped clean.''

''Clint, you didn't see nothin' of Lee——?'' Tad began anxiously, but again the foreman interrupted.

"He's ridin' line on the east section. Link, you shoot in to Dexter for Matt Cooley and a couple of his dep'ties! Get a fresh bronc, Clint, and you and Tad come with me. We'll show them —— —— rustlers."

The men raced for the corral with one accord, and presently the dust rose again thicker than before upon the road, to settle slowly when quiet brooded once more over the Circle Six.

Meanwhile, on the highway which skirted the little cattle town of Dexter,—local usage had years since abbreviated its name from that of its founder, the late owner of the Circle Six,—out beyond the Eating House and the railroad, a girl had halted her broncho in the shade of a clump of mesquite bushes. She was winsomely pretty, with a mutinous, provocative curve of her red lips and an imperious tilt of the small, pointed chin which argued an already awakened knowledge of her power, despite the boyishly immature figure that betrayed her extreme youth.

The road in each direction stretched deserted and still under the glare of the sun, and Sylvia's blue eyes snapped with vexation as she pulled off her broad-brimmed hat and pushed back the damp golden curls that clustered about her forehead.

Then, all at once, her eyes softened, and with

a little smile she slipped lightly from her saddle and engaged herself busily in an elaborate pretense of cinching her girth. A lone figure on horseback had rounded the bend ahead at an easy lope, whistling a catchy melody that more properly belonged to the environment of Broadway than the plains.

At sight of her the whistling stopped and he urged his broncho forward, flinging himself carelessly from the saddle before he had fairly reined in beside her. The newcomer was a clean-cut, athletic looking young man, attired in the faultlessly tailored riding clothes which had aroused Link Dole's contempt; but, although his glossy brown hair had been sleekly brushed until it shone, there was nothing weak or foppish in the expression of his steady gray eyes and firm though humorously mobile mouth.

"In trouble, Miss Poindexter? Will you allow me——?" His voice was pleasantly modulated and the crisp enunciation was in marked contrast to the nasal masculine drawl to which the girl was accustomed.

She blushed and drew in a little quick breath.

"—If—if you don't mind, Mr. Chanler. I think the girth has got loosened some way."

He adjusted it gravely, and, although there was a gleam of amusement in his eyes at her trans-

parency, no hint of it betrayed itself in his tone as he remarked:

"There. It only needed taking up a bit, you see. You don't often come by this road, do you?"

Sylvia shook her head.

"You don't either. I—I mean, I've never seen you out this way before," she amended hurriedly. "I thought I'd ride out and see old Mrs. Bently this afternoon, but it got so hot, and my saddle kept slipping——."

"It was fortunate for me that I happened along. May I ride back a little way with you if you have decided to return to the Circle Six?" Garrison Chanler had familiarized himself with the roads about Dexter, and he knew that the one upon which this innocently beguiling infant had waylaid him was a roundabout way indeed to the Bently ranch, but there was only grave deference in the manner with which he cupped her tiny foot in his hand and assisted her to mount once more.

"It—it seems to me there's a little breeze coming up, don't you think so?" Sylvia turned the full battery of her limpid, round eyes upon him as he stood for a moment beside her. "We could take the trail over by Grosscup's Pool if you're not in a hurry to get back to Dexter?"

"Indeed I'm not. Grosscup's Pool sounds refreshing. It lies to the north, doesn't it?" He

turned his broncho's head, vaulted into the saddle, and they cantered off side by side at an easy gait.

"It's where the creek which crosses our ranch winds around to the northeast and widens out in a basin of rocks in a gulley," Sylvia explained. "Grosscup was a prospector who came looking for gold ever so long ago and was supposed to have discovered it there and gone crazy from joy over it, but nobody else ever found any. I like it because it is cool and shady and mossy, and it's so out of the way that hardly anybody goes there."

She did not add that, as the one spot in the vicinity which most nearly approached her conception of a romantic setting, she had led more than one awkward and bashful swain thither to torment him with her newly-found coquetry, but she meant to test its effect now upon this maddeningly cool, self-contained denizen of a world which she knew only vicariously, through the medium of magazines and best-sellers. Without knowing why, she resented the fact that his amused, tolerant attitude should disconcert her, and more than anything else in her humored, adulated young life, she wanted to bring him to her feet. Tad Mason's estimate had not been far from the truth.

"I haven't seen your brother since I met him

at the Bar D," Garry Chanler remarked, when they had turned from the highway into the lesser trail.

"Oh, Lee is riding line," responded Sylvia absently. "He is getting back into harness again so as to take over the management of the ranch, now that he has finished college."

"But your foreman——?"

"Wes Hayward is all right, of course, and I don't suppose we should know what to do without him, but it is not like having an owner at the head of things. You don't know much about ranching, do you, Mr. Chanler?"

He shook his head smilingly.

"I've had my first glimpse of it during these last few weeks, but it seems to be a great life; a real man's game. I should imagine, though, that a girl would find it monotonous and a trifle lonely."

"It's—unspeakable." Sylvia gave a vicious little jerk upon her broncho's mouth. "Never going anywhere or—or meeting the right sort of people. I wonder that Lee can settle down contentedly to it after having been away to college, but he is like Susanna, just simply crazy about carrying out father's plan to make the Circle Six the greatest ranch in this section of the State. Sue has managed it ever since father's death, you

know, and Mr. Hayward says there isn't a better man on the place. I—I hate it."

"I have heard a great deal about your sister, although I haven't had the honor of meeting her yet." The easy tolerance was gone from Garry's voice and he spoke with unconsciously quickened interest. "The other ranch owners hereabout have a tremendous respect for her; they tell me that she can rope, and brand, and cut cattle out of a milling bunch as expertly as any puncher could, and that she is quite a remarkable shot, too."

"Yes!" Sylvia's keen ear had caught and as instantly resented the change in his tone, and her own was edged slightly with sarcasm. "You can imagine how proud you would feel to hear your sister called 'Two-gun Sue.' Oh, I know it was only meant for a compliment and Sue just laughed when she heard about it first, but I think it's a—a disgrace. As though she were some sort of a dreadful hold-up person. And she needn't have bothered with the ranch at all, for Wes Hayward was perfectly able to run everything, but she simply *would*. Of course, no—no girl back East where you come from would think of doing such things."

"I doubt if many of them are strong and clever

enough to be able to learn; certainly none that I know would be capable of running a great cattle ranch.'' Garry smiled to himself at the mental picture which rose before him of some of the feminine members of his own set, with whom he played about in town and at the seashore and at country clubs, if they were suddenly to be transplanted to the Circle Six; stately, languid blondes like Daisy Acheson and dark, vivid, sensation-seeking neurasthenics such as Alix Westervelt. What could she be like, the hard-riding, straight-shooting sister of this animated, pink-and-white doll at his side? For the first time since he had heard of her Garry felt an active curiosity concerning Susanna Poindexter, and a whimsical determination was born to meet this elusive Amazon.

''Your sister wasn't at the Bar D dance, was she?'' he asked, pursuing his own train of thought. ''Doesn't she care for such things?''

''I suppose so; I don't know.'' There was a trace of petulance in Sylvia's tone. ''Sue hardly ever goes. She is out and about the ranch from dawn, you know, and evenings she fusses over the accounts and talks business with Wes Hayward. She hasn't been any fun at all since Father died, and she won't let me do half the things I want

to, or go visiting anywhere. You see, Sue brought me up and she can't seem to realize that I'm not a child any longer."

"Elder sisters cannot, sometimes, I'm told!" Garry laughed. Could it be that Susanna was a dour, weatherbeaten old maid? Somehow that was not the impression he had formed of her from the honest if rough admiration he had heard expressed by the boss of the Bar D outfit and more than one of Dexter's leading citizens. The sheriff, "Big Matt" Cooley, for instance, had boasted with respectful pride that it was he who had taught Miss Susanna to shoot from the hip as soon as her small finger had strength enough to pull the trigger, and Big Matt himself was obviously not far over the forty mark. Miss Susanna could therefore not be so much older as her little sister had unconsciously given him to infer.

But had it been done quite unconsciously? Was there latent if crudely practised guile beneath this ingenuous unsophistication? Garry turned slightly and glanced at the young girl by his side to find her staring straight before her with a little angry light in her eyes and her rosebud mouth drawn down resentfully at the corners. As though conscious of his gaze she turned to him with a smile half mirthful and half defiant.

"Sue will have to realize that I am grown up soon, for when I am of age I mean to sell out my third of the ranch and go everywhere and have everything that other girls have," she declared. Then her eyes fell and a dainty flush swept over her cheeks. "But you—you're not interested in the troubles of poor little me."

"Indeed I am," he played up mechanically. "If you are not in sympathy with the plans of your sister and brother, and unsuited to the rough sort of existence out here it would be a shame for you to bury yourself on the plains. It is a hazardous life, too, for a woman, isn't it? Of course, the dangers of pioneer days are long past, but there are tales of cattle thieves——?"

"Rustlers?" Sylvia shrugged. "The half-breeds run off a few of our cows now and then, but I shouldn't be allowed out of a corral if there were any real danger!—There's the pool, straight ahead."

The road dipped sharply and curved to avoid a gulley walled with rocks, between which rose clumps of trees to shade the rippling pool below. The springs which fed it on either side caused the creek to widen out here into a natural basin and from the outlet the tinkle of falling water came refreshingly to their ears.

The bronchos picked their way eagerly though

sure-footedly down the steep path, and, after permitting them to drink sparingly, Garry tethered them and joined Sylvia, who had seated herself on a mossy rock beside a merrily bubbling spring.

"It's pretty here, isn't it?" she asked.

"An enchanted spot!" Garry agreed enthusiastically. "But I thought you said no one ever came here? Somebody has invaded your fairyland, Miss Poindexter; there are ashes over there on an improvised stone fireplace and the remains of food. Surely we are too far from the railroad for tramps——?"

"Campers, maybe, or punchers hiking north," Sylvia replied indifferently. "Some of them are born rovers, you know, and won't stay long on any one ranch after the spring round-up."

"By the way, your brother invited me out to the Circle Six." With the riding-crop, which he carried in lieu of a quirt, Garry had been prodding the moss in a crevice between the stones at his feet, but now he turned and looked into her eyes. "Won't you, too, ask me to come before I leave for the East?"

"Why, of course," she stammered, impatient of the blush which she could feel rising once more into her cheeks beneath his glance. "I—I should have asked you before, but out here we sort of expect people to take our hospitality for granted.

You must have thought it dreadfully ill-mannered of me."

"On the contrary, I've been curious about you ever since I met you, Miss Poindexter," he retorted truthfully enough. "At the risk of having you think me rude in my turn, I have wondered—you say you have never been anywhere, and yet your manner—you are not like the other young people I have met hereabouts and in some of the boom towns."

Sylvia dimpled and then her lip curled slightly.

"Like the other ranch girls, you mean?" she supplemented. "I don't talk like a puncher or eat with my knife or wear cheap finery. Father was a professor down in a little fresh water college in the South before his lungs gave out and he came here ahead of the railroad and started the Circle Six with a few head of miserable, half-starved shorthorns. Mother followed him out West, then other ranchers settled around, and that brought a store and hotel, and—and some saloons and gambling places that strung themselves out on a single street and called it 'Dexter.' It will never be anything but a cow-town, of course, but Father was always proud of it. After Sue was born he sent for books and taught her until it was time for her to go to Kansas City to school, and he prepared Lee for his entrance ex-

aminations for college before he died. We—we aren't just heathen, you see, Mr. Chanler."

"You know that I never thought you were!" he responded laughingly, but his thoughts reverted once more to the unknown other girl. "So your sister went to school in Kansas City?"

Sylvia bit her lip. Bother Sue! Why should he keep talking about her when he hadn't even seen her? And he had spoken of going away——.

"You don't expect to stay very much longer in Dexter?" She ignored his question.

"I must start for the East in a few days, a week at most," he replied. "I have idled about here longer than I intended, as it is, but I found this part of the country unexpectedly interesting."

Sylvia promptly accepted the rather vague explanation as a subtly meant compliment to herself, but dismay at the concrete fact of his imminent departure swallowed up all other emotion.

"'A week!'" she repeated forlornly, in naïve self-betrayal.

"Yes. We'll have one more opportunity to try those new steps I showed you, though, if you will be kind enough to save me a dance or two on Saturday night." He spoke lightly, but in a slightly more formal tone, after a quick side-

glance at her. Good Lord, the child wasn't going to weep over his departure, was she? A few dances, a ride or so together, with never a touch of the hand or a word which might remotely be construed as anything but the most casual friendly conversation, and yet those astonishingly blue eyes of hers had seemed suddenly to have misted with tears. Garry was not vain enough to be under any delusion that the girl had fallen in love with him, but he was touched by her attitude, even while it discomfited him. Poor little thing! She was only interested in him because he was the first Easterner she had encountered, and she hadn't learned to dissemble with her first breath, like the girls of his own set at home. "You are going to that affair at the Triangle Four, aren't you?"

His momentary pause for reflection had given Sylvia time to recover herself and she replied with elaborate indifference:

"I suppose Lee will take me, but it is funny to hear you call it an 'affair,' Mr. Chanler. I am not ridiculing the hospitality of my friends out here, but a wheezy player-piano and an uneven floor and a supper that comes mostly from tin cans wouldn't be called just that back East, would it?" Despite herself, a note of bitterness had crept into her tones, and, as though conscious of it

herself, she rose suddenly. "It's getting late, don't you think? If I am not home by sundown, Sue will have the whole outfit riding the range for me."

CHAPTER II

THE HOLD-UP

AT an hour before sunset another girl was approaching the Circle Six from quite a different direction. Long-limbed and deep-chested, with the superb lines of budding maturity, the carriage of her small head on its slender neck and the rounded slimness of wrists and ankles told of a line of breeding as fine and unbroken as that of the magnificent black mare which she bestrode with the ease of one born to the saddle.

Her skin was tanned a clear brown, and brown, too, was the soft hair, windblown now, although it glinted ruddily where the slanting rays of the sun reached it beneath her hat. Her eyes were gray-blue and steady, with the depth which comes from looking into far-vast stretches, and her small chin was firmly dominant.

Thoroughbreds both, there was no hint of weariness in either the girl or her mount, though they had ridden hard and far, but as they came parallel with the first line of barbed wire which marked

the domain of the Circle Six she leaned forward and murmured caressingly:

"Easy now, Moonlady. We are almost home and the last few miles are always the longest, you know——."

Suddenly she straightened in the saddle, shading her eyes with her hand, for, from the midst of a rising dust cloud, upon a branch road to the right, there came the sharp, uneven pounding of uncontrolled hoofbeats and the figure of a bay horse running crazily with empty saddle and swinging stirrups bore down almost directly upon her. As it neared, the girl saw that the white markings upon its breast and shoulder were splashed with crimson. Uttering a low exclamation, she wheeled. The black mare leaped forward beneath her touch and, riding in at a wide curve upon the riderless horse, she seized the loose rein in a grip of steel and shouldered the crazed animal safely around the turn to bring him to a halt.

"Bull's-eye!" Something very like a sob tore its way from between the girl's set teeth, but her eyes flashed. "Bull's-eye, they've got you. Where is your master?"

The horse, trembling in every limb, whinnied softly with pain, but the wild look faded out of the great blood-shot eyes as he rolled them at her.

It was as if he were trying with all his might to speak. The girl examined the wound in his shoulder and then cast the rein free.

"Home, Bull's-eye. You can make it, old boy. Go home and tell them what has happened to Lee."

Responding to the urge in her tone as to the sting of a whip, Bull's-eye gathered his all but spent forces and sprang staggeringly forward along the road which led toward the distant ranch gates. The girl felt for an instant at the leather belt low-hung about her waist and then wheeled the black mare into the by-way, straining her eyes through the settling dust ahead.

If Lee had been riding line at the extreme end of the east section and he had been as badly wounded as his horse she might not find him in time. Even now it might be too late. The state road crossed this a mile or so ahead and it might be that someone had seen the riderless horse, recognized his markings and given the alarm, but few of the neighboring ranchmen would be traversing it at this time in the afternoon and the highway was principally given over to occasional touring motorists. If the darkness should come before she found Lee——.

Stifling an unmistakable sob this time, the girl bent low over the neck of the black mare, urging

her to the limit of her speed. The lines of barbed wire, gleaming in the last rays of the setting sun, flashed past her on either hand like streaks of fire and the dust rose in spiral whirls behind.

She neared the state road and then all at once above the rhythmic beat of Moonlady's flying feet there came to the girl's ears the humming roar of a high-powered car, still subdued by distance but rapidly approaching. With a light but firm touch she slowed the black mare into a loping stride and rode out upon the highway where she halted squarely in its center with one hand upraised.

But the huge, oncoming car showed no disposition to stop. It advanced upon her with undiminished speed while its driver and the figure beside him waved peremptory arms and a masculine shout was lost in the roar of the engine.

The girl did not move or lower her hand, but the other crept to her holster and came away with something levelled and gleaming. The car careened suddenly with a shriek of outraged brakes and came to a jarring stop not two lengths from Moonlady's tense but immovable figure.

"Sorry, but I'll have to borrow your car." The girl's tones rang out clearly and firmly above the imprecations of the man beside the chauffeur on the front seat. "There's a man hurt——."

"A hold-up." The hysterical scream came in a high feminine voice from the tonneau. "Briggs, why did you stop? Why didn't you run the wretch down?"

"It's a—a woman—" the chauffeur began apologetically, but the girl on the black mare was already returning her pistol to its holster.

"I didn't mean to frighten anybody, but you wouldn't slow up and I've got to have your car," she explained. "There has been an accident——"

"Drive on, Briggs." A bulky form swathed in veils and a silk duster rose suddenly in the rear of the car. "Dacon, are you a *worm?* Briggs, drive on, I say. If that creature doesn't get out of the road——."

Two hands flew to the girl's belt this time, there was a quick turn of the slender wrists and twin muzzles gleamed straight from her hips at the occupants of the car.

"Get out." She spoke low but very distinctly. "This is a hold-up, if you like, but it is a matter of life and death. There is a wounded man out there on the range and I have got to reach him. Get out, all of you, except the driver."

The large woman had shrunk back with a second horrified shriek at sight of the guns, but now a taller, more slender figure rose beside her and a

cold, languid, infinitely contemptuous voice drawled:

"Father, are you going to permit us to be despoiled of our car and forced out upon this road by any such flimsy excuse as that? The woman wouldn't dare to fire——"

The sharp bark of a single shot cleaving straight upward into the air caught the word from her lips. The black mare's ears twitched, but she gave no other sign.

Not so the occupants of the car. The chauffeur settled matters for himself by promptly sitting back and elevating both hands above his head, the large lady shrieked once more and covered her eyes, and the second man beside the driver opened the door and stepped spryly down into the road, sweeping off his goggles and cap as he did so to reveal a head sparsely covered with grizzled hair.

"We are at your service, madam," he remarked with grim humor and turned to the tonneau door. "My dear, you should know by experience that I never take issue with a woman, much less one who has so convincing an argument on her side."

The tall, feminine figure alone had remained unmoved, and now, disdaining his hand, it descended and stood waiting while the elderly man assisted the stouter occupant of the tonneau to alight.

Meanwhile, still covering them, the girl had slipped from her saddle, and replacing one pistol she turned the black mare and then touched her lightly on the flank.

"Go home, Moonlady!" she commanded as she had to Bull's-eye. "They'll know I've gone for Lee."

The mare gave one questioning glance from her mistress to the strange monster of a machine and then trotted off obediently back up the side road while the girl approached the car and the trio who stood beside it.

"If you take that road to the first turning to your right and then follow the wire fencing it will lead you straight to the gates of a ranch where they'll take you in," she announced. "Your car will be brought to you there as soon as I have done with it."

The bulky figure had shrunk back in horror at her approach, but the taller one turned away with a mere shrug while the elderly man asked:

"Can you tell me how far it is to the hospitable gates you mention?" He spoke with ironic courtesy, but the girl appeared oblivious to his sarcasm.

"About six miles; four after you strike the fence line. You'll find a town with a hotel of a sort a few miles further should you prefer that,

and they'll lend you horses at the ranch if you can ride them."

There was no hint of contempt in her matter-of-fact tone, but the elderly man reddened slightly.

"If this ranch you mention is the nearest, I fear we must endeavor to reach it and throw ourselves upon the mercy of its owner, but you seem very confident of our welcome."

"In this part of the country we don't refuse our help in time of need, or close our doors to anyone." She mounted to the seat beside the chauffeur, the pistol still resting lightly upon the hip furthest from him. "Turn this car and drive back as fast as you can until you come to a break in the fence where the wires are down on this side of the road; then cut straight through it."

"Yes, ma'am!" he responded with alacrity. "It's back about three miles. Saw it when we passed and there's a dead horse lyin' there; a sort of a calico pony."

Without a word or glance at his employers he turned the switch key and stepped on the starter. With the first low humming of the engine the car began to back in a sweeping curve, to turn and shoot off down the highway in a screening cloud of dust.

A little later, when Garrison Chanler, having

taken leave of Sylvia at the gates of the Circle Six, was loping slowly toward the Bar D for supper and a smoke with the boss of the outfit he came upon a strange group in the road. A tall, willowy girl, whose loosened veils revealed hair of brilliant gold and almost classically perfect features, was moving forward with a languid grace which yet outstripped the pace of a small, elderly man and a massively stout woman who leaned heavily upon him and expelled each breath with a groan.

The young man pulled up his broncho at the same instant that the trio halted and they stared at each other for a long moment in mutually astounded recognition.

"Garry!" the girl cried at last. "Garry, where in the world——?"

"Chanler, by all that's wonderful!" The elderly man unceremoniously withdrew his arm from that of his stout companion and hastened forward while she echoed weakly:

"Mr. Chanler!"

The young man had flung himself from his horse and grasped a hand each of the girl and her father.

"Daisy! Mr. Acheson! You are the last people one would have expected to encounter. And Mrs. Acheson, too!" He advanced toward her, his quick eye taking in their motor attire and gener-

ally disheveled appearance. "You—you're not on a walking tour, surely."

"Call it rather a forced march, my boy." Dacon Acheson spoke with the same grim, dry humor which he had evinced a short time before. "We were held up awhile back and our car commandeered by an enterprising young female road agent——."

"'Commandeered!'" Mrs. Acheson interrupted in high dudgeon. "The car was stolen, Mr. Chanler, and our chauffeur kidnapped. We were compelled to abandon it and all our hand luggage at the point of a pistol——."

"Two pistols, mother," Daisy corrected. "Do let us have all the thrills."

"——And we were fired upon!" supplemented Mrs. Acheson, her tones deepening tragically. "It is a miracle that we were not all murdered in cold blood."

"What's this?" Garry stared from one to the other of them in incredulous amazement. "You cannot be serious. There are no road agents left in this part of the country, to say nothing of female ones——."

"So I would have been willing to swear an hour ago, but I have had reason to change my mind," Acheson remarked. "The young woman most certainly meant business even though the single

shot she fired was into the air, and our chauffeur recognized the signs. You remember Briggs? I selected him to pilot us on this trip because I suspect him of an origin in the gangster element of the lower East Side and although I did not actually anticipate trouble of this sort I thought that he would have more nerve in a possible emergency than the impeccable François. He put up his hands without a murmur, however, and I cannot say that I blame him, considering that the lady had us covered from the start."

"But it—it's all too utterly impossible to believe!" Garry exploded. "You must have been mistaken for some other party and made the butt of a stupid sort of practical joke——?"

"If you think it could be anyone's conception of a joke to force a person in my state of health to leave her car at the mouth of a—a gun, Mr. Chanler, and walk for miles——." Mrs. Acheson's voice ended in a groan.

"You spoke of two pistols——?" Garry turned helplessly to the younger woman. "Was there an accomplice? How many were there in the gang which held you up?"

"Only one," Acheson replied before his daughter could speak. "The young lady was alone on a great black horse, but she operated both guns most effectively from the hip."

From the hip! Two-gun Sue! The thought flashed blindingly across Garry's mind and for a moment his senses reeled. It was utterly absurd, of course, and yet what could be more unbelievable than the actual presence here before him in the Western wilderness of this astute Wall Street financier and his luxury-loving wife, to say nothing of the very girl who had been in his thoughts that afternoon as the epitome of incongruity with his own immediate surroundings.

Choking back an almost hysterical tendency to laugh, the young man eyed the older one speculatively. A girl on a great black horse; hadn't he heard somewhere, from Big Matt perhaps, that Susanna Poindexter rode a black mare which she had broken herself? If there could be some possible explanation——?

"But—but didn't the young woman *say* anything?" Garry stammered at last. "You spoke of her commandeering the car. Didn't she offer any reason for holding you up in that fashion?"

"She blocked the road and drew her gun when Briggs wouldn't stop the car——" Acheson began again, but once more his wife interrupted.

"The creature uttered some far-fetched excuse about someone having been hurt and it being a matter of life and death, but anyone could tell by the way she handled those dreadful pistols that

she was a desperate character. She pointed both of them at us when I ordered Briggs to drive on and force her to get out of the way after he had stopped to avoid running her down, and on Daisy's further remonstrances she fired that shot. I consider it a mercy that we were not all killed outright."

"The—the young woman said that it was a life and death emergency?" Garry repeated slowly. "She compelled you to leave your car and then drove off with Briggs?"

"Yes," Acheson affirmed. "After dismounting and sending her horse back along this road which she directed us to take."

"And where did she say that it would lead?" Astonishment had given place to eager interest in the young man's tones.

"To a ranch where she seemed quite assured that we would find hospitality." The financier was eyeing him narrowly. "Look here, Chanler, you know something. What is it? What did this melodramatic performance mean?"

"I have no more idea than you, Mr. Acheson," Garry responded. "Did this enterprising road agent offer any assurance of returning your stolen property?"

"She said that the car would be brought to us there when she had finished with it." Daisy

spoke suddenly. "She also mentioned a town with a hotel further along if we preferred that to the ranch. Who is she, Garry? She was quite a remarkable looking young person, who sat her horse like a man and issued orders as though she were accustomed to being obeyed. I believe that you know her."

"I don't!" he disclaimed. "I never saw her in my life, but if it is the young woman I think it may be, I should feel inclined to believe that she had some very urgent reason which justified her, in her own mind at least, in commandeering your car even at the point of a gun—two guns. This road leads to the Circle Six ranch and I have met the chap who owns it. Let me show you the way and I am sure that you will be received with all the hospitality in the world."

"And it is actually your opinion that my car and the hand luggage will be returned to me intact, to say nothing of Briggs?" Acheson demanded.

The ghost of a smile flickered in Garry's eyes, but he responded gravely:

"If I were you, I should feel quite as assured of both Briggs and the car as though they were in the garage at home."

CHAPTER III

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY

THE heart of the girl in the car had given a wild leap of exultation when Briggs spoke of the dead "calico pony" lying by the road where the wires were down. Lee had been able to put up a fight, at least, and an examination of the pinto's body might reveal how far he could have run before he dropped so that she might calculate the approximate distance to the place where Lee must be lying.

She did not even glance back at the trio left stranded in the road, but covertly studied the part of the chauffeur's face which was visible beneath his visored cap and goggles. His nose was short and impudently upturned, but the smooth-shaven lips were firm and the square jaw lean and pugnacious and healthily tanned. The red-brown hair beneath the cap showed a tendency to curl, close-cropped though it was, and there was a boyish jauntiness to the set of his broad shoulders as if instead of being cowed by this adventure he was thoroughly enjoying it.

"Was the man hurt bad, ma'am?" Briggs did

not take his eyes from the road ahead as he asked the question, but the friendly interest in his tone was disarming after the strain of the last few minutes and the girl replied frankly:

"I don't know. I'm afraid so. His horse was making for home, shot in the shoulder."

"I thought as much, when I see the other one lyin' there. I says to myself that there'd been some sort of a scrap and I would have stopped right then, only—well, you saw the kind of folks I'm workin' for, ma'am. Don't you think I'd have run you down, though; I'd have ditched this bus first!" He spoke with an honest sincerity, there was no mistaking, and the girl relaxed her tense vigilance with a sigh of relief.

"I wasn't afraid, and whatever trouble there has been here, your people won't be molested. They'll reach the ranch I spoke of safely and be well cared for if the old lady can walk a few miles."

The shoulders beside her heaved slightly and a chuckle came from Briggs' lips.

"It would be worth a month's pay to have Mrs. Acheson hear you call her that, ma'am, and I guess she can make it, though I don't believe she has walked a block in ten years!" He added abruptly in a changed, sobered tone: "We're gettin' near there now, and you needn't keep that gun trained

on me, for I'm with you! You may want both of yours if there's likely to be any little mix-up, and I guess from what I just seen that you're able to handle 'em, ma'am, but if you feel you could trust me with my own it's right under your seat there. Of course, you've got only my word for it that I won't double-cross you——"

He turned then for an instant to face her and the girl looked into a pair of deep brown eyes as confident of being accepted on good faith as those of a friendly, intrepid dog.

Accustomed to quick decisions, the girl nodded and slipped her pistol back once more into its holster.

"Your word is good enough, I am sure, but I don't believe that there will be any further gun-play. The man we have got to find and bring in is my brother, and the only enemies he has are some rustlers—cattle thieves, half-breed Mexicans, for the most part, who have been running off our cows," she explained quickly. "That is our ranch there, on the other side of the fence."

"Gee! All those miles!—And my party thought first that you was stickin' them up for the bank-roll!" He chuckled once more and then exclaimed: "Here we are! I'll need the speed we've got to hurdle that ditch, but we can come back and have a look at the horse. Hold tight, ma'am!"

The heavy car swerved, tilted sickeningly and seemed for an instant to hurl itself through space, landing with a crashing jar which shook every bone in the girl's body as it ploughed through the break in the fence and over the uneven ground for a few rods. Then with another protesting screech of the brake, it halted.

It had scarcely come to a stop when the girl leaped from it and, with the chauffeur close at her heels, ran back through the gap with its trailing wires to where the dead animal lay. It was a Mexican pinto, a wretched specimen of its kind, the lean barrel and flanks roweled and scarred from past ill-usage and still flecked with bloody lather.

Blood had formed in a wide pool, too, from mouth and nostrils, and there was a bullet wound in the chest.

"Maybe you recognize him by the markings?" Briggs suggested. "He must have been stole, too, away back when he was worth stealin', for it looks as though some sort of a brand had been burned off him there, and again on the hoof."

The girl shook her head.

"Some of the punchers might know him, but whatever identification marks there were on the saddle have been ripped away. You can see where

the leather is newly cut. He was shot through the lungs and can't have gone far——!"

She rose from her knees in the trampled earth and stood gazing back over the range with straining eyes.

"That gang was pretty bold about it, or do they usually pull off a trick like this in daylight out here?" The chauffeur was following her gaze. "We didn't pass a livin' soul on the state road for more than fifty miles comin' along, though, so maybe they wasn't takin' so much of a chance at that."

"They must have known where my brother was riding line to-day and lay in wait for him." The girl's lips tightened. "We ought to be able to follow their trail in for a short distance, anyway."

"There was more than one of 'em, you think, ma'am? This tall grass is trampled down, but it's in kind of a narrow line." The chauffeur paused uncertainly as his unaccustomed eyes roved over the patches of crushed mesquite.

"There were two of them and they rode in single file." The girl went slowly forward, following the fresh trail. "The other horse was bigger, but the pinto led; see where he circled around and doubled back? That is when they were looking for their man."

"Gee!" Briggs remarked again in immense respect. "It don't mean anythin' to me, ma'am. I'd think I was goin' some if I could tell the make of a tire by the tracks of its tread in the road, but this beats it! Looks, though, as if they had made for that little hollow over there, doesn't it?"

The trail was indeed leading in ever narrowing circles toward a slight depression in the rolling ground fringed with low scrub brush, and as they neared it the girl paused and her breath caught in her throat. The rank grasses at her feet were blotched here and there with ominous splashes of reddish-brown.

"That's only where the circus pony back there got his, ma'am!" Briggs ventured consolingly.

The girl shook her head.

"These are the hoofprints of a single horse. It must have been poor Bull's-eye, and my brother can't be far off, if——"

Her voice died away in her throat and Briggs asked suddenly in a lowered tone:

"Do you know if there is a rock over there behind that bunch of bushes?"

She followed the direction of his pointing finger and her body tensed, for through the elongated shadows cast by the low scrub she saw that just beyond them there loomed a darker form, as though something were crouched or lying motion-

less. Without a word the girl handed one of her pistols to her companion and then stooping low started to creep toward it, but Briggs placed himself before her.

"No, ma'am," he whispered determinedly. "I'm going first!"

Cautiously, crouching almost to the ground, he circled about the clump with the girl following closely after until they came upon the body of a man. He was lying upon his back with an arm thrown across his face and one leg doubled oddly beneath him, and at the first glimpse of the still figure the girl gave a little sobbing cry and darted forward, to fall upon her knees beside it.

Gently lifting the limp arm, she drew it down to the side of the unconscious form and raised the head to cradle it against her knee. The face so revealed was that of a very young man, scarcely more than a boy, and its resemblance to her own was unmistakable, even though it was cast in a heavier, masculine mold. His hair, however, was yellow, save where an ugly crimson streak matted it dangerously close to the temple, and the lashes which swept the cheeks, unnaturally pallid now beneath their tan, glinted like gold.

"Is it him?" Briggs asked superfluously, and then laid a practiced thumb and forefinger upon the flaccid wrist. "He's got a nasty side-swipe on

the head, ma'am, and I don't like the way that leg is crumpled up under him, but he ain't dead, by a long shot."

She glanced up for a moment and he saw to his inward relief that there were no tears in her eyes, but rather a bright, hard light, and her voice was curiously even and steady as she replied:

"It is my brother. His forehead and scalp were just grazed by a bullet, but his leg is broken, of course; I've seen more than one of our boys like that, and I know. We'll have to carry him back to the car."

"I forgot! I've got something there that'll maybe do some good first." Briggs rose and then hesitated. "You ain't afraid of bein' left here alone with him for a minute till I come back, are you?"

A look was his only answer, and as she bent once more over the boy's body the chauffeur turned and sped away to where they had left the car, just inside the fence. When he returned bearing a vacuum bottle and a small black bag he found that the girl had somehow managed to straighten her brother out upon the ground and was cutting away the stained and sodden cloth from about his knee.

"Gee, that's bad!" Briggs knelt beside her. "Got another ball through the kneecap, didn't he? It's lucky Mrs. Acheson was such a bug about

cartin' a first-aid kit with her; she's got enough in here for a young hospital, and there's hot coffee in that bottle.''

Together they bandaged the boy's head and shattered knee and then, raising him to a half-sitting posture, they forced a little of the warm coffee between his lips. He gulped and moaned faintly, but gave no further sign, and the girl looked up once more at her companion.

''It will be just as well, perhaps, if he doesn't regain consciousness until we can get him back to the ranch and one of the boys can ride in to Dexter for the doctor,'' she remarked, still in that level, unemotional tone. ''The pain is likely to be pretty bad in that knee. We can carry him between us to the car——''

''No, ma'am,'' Briggs dissented once more. ''You just stand aside and I can carry him easy. Is Dexter the town you spoke about awhile back to the old man—Mr. Acheson, I mean?''

''Yes. Hadn't you better get the car out into the road again before we put my brother into it? That hurdle over the ditch——''

''I did already, ma'am, when I went back for the kit.'' He paused and added slyly: ''I wouldn't be surprised if the ranch we're headed for is the same one you directed my party to.''

''It is. It's the Circle Six.'' The girl looked

somewhat doubtfully from her brother's recumbent form to the chauffeur. "Are you sure you can carry him alone?"

"Watch me!" Briggs grinned, and, with a swift but gentle movement, gathered the boy up in his arms, and strode off through the gathering dusk, while she followed with the bag and bottle.

The car was at the side of the road, headed once more in the direction in which it had originally been traveling. The girl settled herself in the tonneau, supporting her brother in her arms, as the chauffeur eased him down beside her, and they started slowly upon the homeward way.

As they turned into the branch road, Briggs glanced over his shoulder.

"All right, ma'am? Ain't shakin' him up too much, am I?"

"No. My brother hasn't moved." For the first time she smiled faintly. "You've been awfully good; I don't know how I should have managed without you!"

"Any white man would have done as much!" That portion of his face which was visible beneath the goggles reddened, however, at her praise. "The reason why I asked you about Dexter was because this bus can travel faster than any horse, and if you'll send a man with me to show the way

so that I won't lose any time, I'll drive in for the doctor as soon as I get you to the ranch."

The twilight was deepening into dark when, just before they reached the gate of the Circle Six, a whirlwind cavalcade swept from it and dashed furiously down the road toward them, with Wes Hayward in the lead and Tad Mason, Link Dole and several more strung out behind him. Briggs slowed down and the group separated as they came on and drew up on each side of the car.

"Miss Sue!" Wes gulped. "You found him! Gosh-almighty, is he hurt bad?"

"I'm afraid so. A shot just grazed his head, but there's another through his kneecap," Susanna responded.

"Who done it?" The others had crowded their bronchos closer.

"I don't know, but there's a dead pinto back there on the state road where our wires are down." She shifted her burden slightly and a low moan came from the boy's white lips. "Some of you might recognize him by the markings."

"I reckon we don't need to see him to figger what outfit he belongs to!" Wes turned with a quiet menace to the chauffeur. "And you! You're the feller that had to be held up to make you stop! We been hearin' all about it from a gray-muzzled

ole coyote that blew in to the ranch with two feemales! You——!"

An ominous murmur arose from the others and Susanna cried:

"No, Wes! He only obeyed orders at first, and he's been splendid! I never should have been able to bring Lee in without his help!—Let one of the boys lead your bronc home and you get in with me."

The change was effected and as the car started off slowly once more the others fell in behind, except for Tad Mason, who at a sign from the foreman galloped off down the road.

"We'd ha' been out lookin' for you before this, Miss Sue, but Clint brought in word that the wires were down away over on the aidge of the west section, beyond the crick, an' we kited out there," Wes explained.

"That must have been just a blind to draw as many of you as possible from this end of the range." Susanna had lowered her voice. "You think it was Jake Brower?"

"Him or some of that greaser outfit of his'n! Sheriff and two of his dep'ties are huntin' him now, but they say he ain't showed up around Dexter for two or three days, nor Pedro Ruiz and Felix Mesega either. We've just naterally got to

run that outfit out of the county, but we can't do it on the say-so of——"

He hesitated and Susanna finished for him.

"Of the del Rio girl? She can't be so bad, Wes. Remember how she worked over the boys who were hurt when Montana Dan tried to shoot up the town?"

"Good or bad, Miss Sue, when a feemale gits mad at some pore feller 'cause she cain't put her brand on him, there ain't nothin' too ornery for her to accuse him of! But Felix Mesega is mixed up in this business with Jake, shore. When we got back to the ranch house we found that Bull's-eye had come in, shot through the shoulder, and then Moonlady. We knew you must be with Lee somewhere's, then, and we was just ridin' out to find you when out of the ranch house comes a little ole cuss madder'n a bobcat, with a yarn about bein' held up by a—a——!"

Words evidently failed the foreman and again Susanna supplied them.

"A woman road agent. You knew, of course, that it was I?"

"I suspicioned it before he'd said ten words, of course, after them hosses had come in, and the look on Miss Sylvie's face when she follered him out would have told me, anyways." He paused as

they turned in at the gates and added: "I opine the boys would've strung him up but there warn't time."

"No, Wes," Susanna replied gravely. "These people are our guests as long as they remain at the Circle Six and they must be treated with every courtesy, so please pass the word on to the boys. When we get Lee into the house, Link or one of the others must go in the car here with this man to Dexter in order to show him the road and bring out Doctor Rankin."

"If the Doc ain't off on one of his bootleggin' trips or hittin' up what's left from the last one," Wes responded skeptically. "He's the only one nearer than Mammon City, anyways, so we'll have to chance it."

Briggs had brought the car to a gentle halt before the door of the ranch house and as he descended and opened the tonneau door the light streamed forth and Sylvia's voice quavered:

"Oh, Sue, is that you? Has something happened to Lee? There are some perfectly wonderful people here from New York City and they told me of the dreadful thing you had done——!"

"Go back," retorted Susanna briefly. "Lee is hurt, but not badly. Keep those people out of the way. I'll call you when I need you."

"I guess Lee is my brother, too!" There was

indignant protest, very close to tears, in Sylvia's voice, but she retreated nevertheless, leaving the door wide, and Briggs began tentatively:

"If you'll let me carry him in, ma'am——?"

"I opine we can 'tend to that without your help, young feller!" interrupted Wes jealously as the rest of the escort drew up on their bronchos, but again Susanna intervened.

"Of course you and the boys can, Wes, but I told you before that if it hadn't been for this young man's help and kindness I could never have brought Lee home. Let him give you a hand and we'll put Lee on the couch in the living-room till Doctor Rankin comes."

Together Wes and Briggs carried the still unconscious boy into the spacious room while the punchers dismounted and crowded about the doorway muttering in subdued fashion among themselves. Then the grimly taciturn Link Dole started off with Briggs for Dexter, the punchers turned their bronchos into the corral and made their way to the cook house and Susanna was left alone with her brother.

But not for long. Even as she bent over him to moisten the bandage about his head a quick but light step sounded behind her and the little, elderly, grizzled man appeared.

"It seems that we owe you an apology, madam."

He spoke in a subdued, dry tone. "My name is Dacon Acheson. I trust your brother has not been severely injured. Had you explained we should have been only too glad to take you back to the scene of his—er—accident."

"And subject your family to the possibility of a real little shooting party?" Susanna asked coldly. "As I remember, I wasn't given the opportunity for an explanation of any sort."

"That was entirely the fault of Amelia—my wife!" Acheson said quickly, but still in that subdued tone with a side glance at the still figure on the couch. "She has a —a most positive disposition. However, you will admit, my dear young lady, that your argument was most effective! I understand that my chauffeur has gone for a physician to attend your brother, but in the meantime my object in intruding upon you is to offer my services if I can be of use to you in any way."

"Thank you," Susanna added pointedly; "I hope that my sister has made you and your family comfortable?"

"Oh, quite!" He hastened to assure her and then hesitated. "I have learned that the hotel in the town, a few miles away, which you suggested, while excellent of its type would not be—er—pleasing to Mrs. Acheson and our daughter, and the nearest one of the sort to which they are accus-

tomed is in a place called Mammon City. Will you be so good as to tell me how far that is and if the roads are quite safe at night? Mrs. Acheson, as you know, is nervous and highly strung and in spite of her appearance, far from well——"

"Mr. Acheson," Susanna interrupted with a calmness bordering on exasperation. "Such hospitality as the Circle Six can boast we offer you gladly until Mrs. Acheson feels able to continue her journey. Please make yourselves as much at home as you find possible in these unaccustomed surroundings. Cook will serve dinner in a little while, and in the meantime I feel that my brother needs my undivided attention. I hope that under the circumstances you will forgive my unceremonious appropriation of your car this afternoon and if you require anything my sister will be only too glad to play hostess in my stead."

Stammering his thanks the elderly little man accepted the hint and withdrew. A moment later Lee Poindexter opened his eyes.

"Sue! It was Jake Brower! He got me!"

CHAPTER IV

THE LAST STAND

"HOW'S he comin', Miss Sue?" Wes Hayward lowered his voice sepulchrally, although the two were over near the corral separated by several rods from the rear veranda of the ranch house. "Did Doc Rankin make a decent job of it last night?"

"Splendid! I don't think that even a doctor from Mammon City could have performed a better operation, and Lee is resting easily," Susanna replied happily. Then her brow clouded. "You haven't heard anything from Big Matt Cooley or his deputies about their search for the men who clipped the wire over beyond the creek yesterday, have you? I've been talking with Clint and he seems to think it was Jake Brower or some of his gang of rustlers, but Lee was away over at the other end of the ranch on the east section, you know, and yet his first conscious words to me last night were that Jake himself got him."

Wes chewed reflectively on the quid he had not been able to dispose of at Susanna's sudden appearance and then remarked:

"Wal, Miss Sue, I think it's like you said when we met up with you on the road in that car last night. Them wires acrost the crick was nipped by Mesega or some of the gang under Brower's orders just as a blind to draw as many of us in that *di*-rection as possible, while Jake hisself went to settle up accounts with Lee. Thing is, how'd Jake know Lee was ridin' line on the east section yesterday, and alone, at that? Big Matt nor none of his dep'ties except Sim Moser was in Dexter last night when Link and Bill rode in for the Doc."

" 'Bill'?" repeated Susanna with a ghost of a smile.

Wes' weatherbeaten face reddened and then he chuckled.

"The feller who drives for them three swells you've got up to the house," he explained. "They call him 'Briggs,' like he didn't have any first name to him, but he 'pears to be a regular hombre, and he says he'd quit 'em right now only he promised to get 'em home to New York. When he does, he wants to hike back here pronto, and if you say so, Miss Sue, I can give him a job. He don't know a shorthorn from a white-face hardly, but he'll learn quick, and if you're goin' to get one of them gas engines you was talkin' about——?"

Susanna's own face sobered.

"I—I don't know, Wes. You are the only one

except Lee who knows how matters really stand about the Circle Six and the fight I've been making to keep it. It may pass out of our hands before the gas engine becomes a possibility."

"Oh, shucks, Miss Sue!" Wes spoke with awkward sympathy. "We're doin' fine this year, and that lawyer hombre in Mammon City can shore stretch things a little further!"

"I'm afraid not. Uncle Dave Hartwell would do anything he could for us, but he has already stretched things, as you call it, just about to the limit. Has anyone ridden in to Dexter for the mail yet this morning?"

"Tad Mason; he ought to be back now any time. And there's another thing, Miss Sue. It was Tad who rode back last night to have a look at that dead pinto by the break in the fence and he found someone else there ahead of him; that Easterner who's stayin' down to the Central Hotel. Chanler, his name is. He 'lowed to Tad that he'd seen that pinto more'n once 'round Dexter and the hombre that was ridin' him was small and quick as a cat, and darker than the ordinary greaser, like he wasn't altogether Mex, with thick lips and a flat nose and a scar down one side of his face."

"Pedro Ruiz!" Susanna breathed. "Jake's head man next to Feliciano Mesega!"

"That's who it sounds like," nodded Wes. "That Chanler hombre's got sharp eyes, if he is lazy lookin', and moseyin' 'round Dexter with nothin' on his mind but his hat. You ain't met up with him, have you, Miss Sue?"

Susanna shook her head.

"No. Lee knows him and Sylvia met him at a dance at the Bar D, but I never saw him. If he's sure about the description of the man he noticed on that pinto the sheriff ought to be told at once."

"I told Tad to leave word for Big Matt in Dexter this morning——" The foreman broke off and shading his eyes with his hand squinted at a faint puff of dust rising in little swirls far off down the road. "That must be Tad comin' now."

"Send the mail up to the ranch house, then, Wes, and—I may want to talk things over with you later." Susanna moved off. "Let me know if there is any news from the sheriff."

After Doc Rankin's ministrations on the previous evening Lee had been placed in his own bed. Now, as Susanna entered the dim, cool living-room, a tall, brilliantly blonde girl rose slowly from a low chair and faced her. There was thinly veiled hostility in that cold, supercilious stare, but Susanna regarded her serenely.

"I hope that you were made as comfortable as our conveniences here permit," she remarked

quietly. "If there is anything that you or your mother require, please do not hesitate to ask for it. My little sister is inexperienced and with sudden illness in the house one is apt to fail in the lesser considerations for one's guests."

"We only regret that we are compelled to force ourselves upon your hospitality for a day or two, because of the severe nervous shock which my mother suffered yesterday." There was a palpable sneer in Daisy Acheson's tones. "Although we realize that the necessity was in turn forced upon *us*, you can appreciate the fact that we do not care to consider ourselves guests and it is infinitely distasteful to us to accept any hospitality. We would prefer to pay——?"

Susanna interrupted her and now there was something ominous in the even, level courtesy of her voice.

"I'm sorry. I don't believe there is any boarding-place nearer than Dexter, where, beside the Central Hotel, you would find only Ma Hooper's. There is plenty of bootleg whiskey in town and as she caters mostly to Mexicans and punchers on a holiday, there are sometimes shots which are not fired into the air, and which might prove even a greater shock to Mrs. Acheson's nerves than she encountered yesterday. I assure you that

your stay here at the Circle Six will be made as little distasteful to you as possible."

She bowed slightly and without waiting for the other girl to reply, turned and passed around the gallery into her brother's room.

"Hello, Sue." He greeted her weakly from among his pillows. "How is Bull's-eye? You told me he reached home——?"

"He's all right, Lee, dear." There was a surprising quiver of tenderness in Susanna's usually calm, capable tones as she bent to smooth the coverlet. "I've just been out to see him, and Wes says the ball only grazed the flesh without touching a muscle or tendon; he'll be as good as ever in a week or so."

"Thank the Lord. I don't think another horse could ever be the same to me as old Bull's-eye." Lee kicked out his sound leg beneath the covers with a boyishly impatient motion and added irrelevantly: "Sue, I—I wish you'd just forget what I told you last night about Jake Brower. I mean, don't let Big Matt know who got me, or even Wes and our boys."

"But, Lee, why?" Susanna's big, gray-blue eyes opened wide. "Hasn't Jake made trouble enough?"

"It isn't that. The rustling is a different

matter, but this is a personal affair between Jake and me, and I don't want him caught or run out of the county till I'm on my feet again. I don't believe I'll be laid up as long as that fool Doc Rankin says I shall, but I don't care if it's a year. Jake's my man, and I want to get him myself. We're Poindexters, Sue, and you know that our people for generations back in the South have settled their own scores." The boy's face flushed. "I don't need any sheriff's posse to fight my battles for me."

"Yes, we are Poindexters." Susanna spoke quietly enough, but her small head was lifted proudly and her eyes flashed for an instant. Then she added: "I can't go out and get Jake and his pack of greasers for you, Lee, because I'm only a girl, and it is too late to keep it from the sheriff. You see, Jake wasn't alone last night when he lay in wait for you."

"I know it." Lee nodded in grim satisfaction. "Couldn't tell who the other fellow was, it all happened so quick, but I shot his pinto from under him."

"Yes, and that dead pinto has been recognized by an Easterner who is staying at the Central Hotel as one he has seen Pedro Ruiz ride. Of course, if Ruiz is caught he will give Jake away fast enough to save himself."

"Confound the luck." Lee moved impatiently once more and then suppressed a groan. "An Easterner, you say? That must be Chanler; he's an awfully good sort and I asked him to drop out to the Circle Six sometime. Say, Sylvia told me this morning that we've got a real society couple from New York staying here, with a gorgeously beautiful daughter. How did it happen? She wouldn't give me any details."

"They—they're touring and they had a slight accident to their car," Susanna explained faintly. "They'll be gone in a day or two and won't bother you. Try to sleep now, Lee. Wun See will bring you in some broth in a little while."

" 'Broth!' " Lee snorted contemptuously. "I want some steak and pie. I tell you, Sue, I'll be out of this in a week in spite of Doc Rankin if I have to get Wes to make me a crutch."

Smiling back at the rebellious patient Susanna left the room, but her smile faded when on the back porch she found Tad Mason waiting for her with a single long, legal-looking envelope in his hands. It bore the postmark of Mammon City and in the upper, left-hand corner the name of David Hartwell, attorney and counsellor-at-law.

Without heeding the puncher's excited story of his conference with the sheriff, she tore open the envelope and read the brief, typed enclosure it

contained. As her eyes followed the lines they darkened and the color ebbed slowly from her face. When she had finished she folded the page once more and stood running the creases idly between fingers that trembled slightly, but her voice was still steady as she asked:

"What were you saying, Tad? Something about Big Matt?"

"Yes, Miss Sue." In his eagerness to impart news he had not observed the impression which the letter had made upon her. "You know that neither Jake Brower nor them greasers that trail with him have been 'round Dexter for nigh onto a week? Wal, that hombre from the East who reckernized Pedro Ruiz's pinto when I couldn't, found where them rustlers had been hidin' out and told Big Matt. It's at Grosscup's Pool, and the sheriff, he aims to git a diamond hitch on the whole bunch tonight—reg'lar roundup. Miss Sue——?"

"Yes, Tad?" she asked as he hesitated.

"We don't none of us just get the brand on that Garry Chanler, the Easterner. If he'd ha' come here to the Circle Six and declared hisself to you or Wes we'd ha' *knowed* he was sent by the Cattleman's Protective Association. He don't say nothin' nor *do* nothin' 'cept ride out every afternoon on one of Sim Moser's broncs,

like he was ridin' for his health, but he shore do keep his eyes open. I—I kinder wish you'd meet up with him and look him over, now Lee's hog-tied."

"Perhaps I shall." Susanna was still fingering the letter. "Tad, go and find Wes for me, will you? Tell him I'll be out behind the cook-house in ten minutes."

"Miss Sue?" A breaking note in her tones had penetrated all at once to his consciousness. "I'll shore git him pronto but it—it ain't more trouble that I brung you in that letter?"

"No, Tad; not more trouble, but I've got to go away for a day or two, and I'll have to depend on you and the other boys as well as Wes to see that Lee is kept in bed and gets on all right, and that everyone of the outfit treats our visitors here so that when they leave, the Circle Six may still be proud of the open gates and—and the light in the window."

Tears were in Susanna's voice and eyes now and Tad cleared his throat gustily before he replied.

"I guess there ain't none of the outfit goin' to forgit what the Circle Six means, Miss Sue, no matter how—how *ornery* the folks is that stops here. And as for Lee, he cain't git out of bed noways, lessen we help him, and with that knee

of his'n he's good for a month plumb where he is. Don't you worry none while you gotta go away; we ain't none of us failed you nor the ranch yit. I—I'm goin' to git Wes."

He turned and started off precipitately in the direction of the corral and Susanna slipped the letter back into its envelope, wiped her eyes surreptitiously on a wisp of a handkerchief and turned to re-enter the house, when Sylvia confronted her, with hazel eyes ablaze and narrowed felinely.

"Sue, what have you done to—to Miss Acheson? She was awfully nice to me before and now she will hardly speak to me. After what you did yesterday——."

"Sylvia." Susanna, stern-lipped, placed her hand upon her younger sister's shoulder. "I am going to Mammon City for a day or two. Remember that the Achesons are our guests and everything must be done for their comfort but we—you and Lee and I—are not in their debt; don't allow Miss Acheson to make you feel small, my dear, because you have not yet had an opportunity to know her world. I shall, of course, leave Wes in charge of the ranch, but you are the hostess in my place here at the house. See that you don't forget it, no matter what little unpleasantness may arise. I prefer not to discuss with

you what I did yesterday, and I positively forbid your mentioning it to Lee or giving him one single detail if he asks. Do you understand?"

Sylvia's cupid's-bow lips pouted sullenly, but she had never heard quite that tone in her sister's voice before and gradually the fire died out of her eyes and she lowered them discreetly.

"I'm sure *I* don't want to talk about it to anyone," she remarked loftily. "Are you going to Mammon City to see that tiresome old Mr. Hartwell again? I don't see why he can't leave us alone."

"If he had, Sylvia, the Circle Six would have been taken away from us before this," retorted Susanna, and then in sudden weariness she turned away. "Tell Wun See to take Lee's broth to him when it is ready. I've got to see Wes."

"Oh, Sue!" In swift, impulsive contrition the younger girl threw her arms about the neck of the other. "I am sorry I was so horrid, but I do want to know really wonderful people like the Achesons some day; I don't want to stay for always on the Circle Six. I know you are having a lot of trouble and it is for me and Lee as well as yourself. I wish I could help."

"Then run into my room and pack a bag for me, dear." With instant generosity Susanna dropped a light kiss upon her cheek. "This is

Thursday and I'll try to be home by the end of the week, but if not I'll send you a wire. Be careful not to worry Lee over this; it is just a stupid mix-up about some papers that have to be drawn up and signed and witnessed all over again."

"If that's all, I don't see why you can't get back by tomorrow night?" Sylvia paused in the doorway.

"I may have to wait for a man who has been away and who must sign the papers, too." Susanna told her brave falsehood glibly. "Hurry with the bag, dear. I want to get the noon train from Dexter."

Wes Hayward was striding back and forth frowningly in the small patch of shade afforded by the rear wall of the cook house and when Susanna rounded the corner he advanced toward her anxiously.

"Tad said you wanted to see me, Miss Sue, and that you was goin' away. You didn't tell me nothin' 'bout it afore the mail come and I—it ain't 'bout the Circle Six?"

She nodded.

"Lee mustn't be worried over this and start up a fever, and Sylvia is too young to have to meet any trouble before it actually comes, Wes, but this is our last chance; the last stand. Uncle

Dave seems to think from his letter that it will be a miracle if I can get even a thirty-day extension on those notes but I've got to try."

"Thirty days!" Wes growled in dismay. "Why, Miss Sue, we've got to have till the fall round-up or we ain't got a chance in h— in the world to pull through."

"We've said that for two years now, you know; first the spring round-up, then the fall. It wasn't our fault, but bankers in a place like Mammon City, who only know cattle ranches by the reports sent in to them, can't realize all the things we have had to fight against and how hard we have tried, *you* more than anyone, Wes. We've managed to keep up the interest, but the notes themselves are long overdue and they can force a sale of the Circle Six in order to get back the money that father borrowed from them," Sue explained. "I ought to have told you that the last extension I got on the notes would be up five days from now, perhaps, but I didn't want to discourage you and I hoped against hope that we could put off the final reckoning until after the fall round-up. It may be that we shall be able to, after all, for who knows what may happen in the next thirty days? I felt, though, that you ought to know the truth now."

Wes ran his hand despondently through his grizzled hair.

"Best bunch of cattle we've had in years, too." He spoke as if to himself. "Good weather, fine grazin', lots of water and nothin' to bother us but that ornery gang of rustlers, and now on top of what happened to Lee yesterday, we've got *this* starin' us in the face. We've all done our best, Miss Sue, and if it hadn't 'a' been for you and what you made out to do with that lawyer hombre down to Mammon City the ranch would have gone long ago. We—we've just *got* to keep on hopin'."

"That's the spirit, Wes." Susanna forced a note of cheer in her tones. "You've got full charge of the Circle Six as usual, of course. I hate to leave, even for a few days, with Lee hurt and the Acheson party here, to say nothing of the further trouble you may have with Jake Brower and his greasers, but it cannot be helped."

"I'll take keer of Jake and his gang if Big Matt don't," Wes promised grimly. "Here comes Link with the buckboard to drive you in to Dexter for your train. Bill offered to take you in that car, but I guessed one ride in anythin' belongin' to them folks was enough for you."

"It was, though it was kind of Bill to suggest it. Sylvia's calling me from the back porch, too, and I've got to see Lee for a minute." Susanna

held out her hand. "Goodbye, Wes. Look out for things."

"Goodbye, Miss Sue." He crushed the small hand in both of his huge, horny ones and a note of anxiety mingled with the genuine affection in his voice. "Goodbye and—good luck."

CHAPTER V

THAT CHANLER HOMBRE

"I'LL be dawg-gone if all the folks who've come here from the East lately ain't plumb loco." Link Dole gnawed off a generous wedge of plug cut and passed the cake of tobacco to the foreman as together they issued from the cook house after the midday dinner. "There's that Chanler hombre hangin' 'roun' Dexter for no reason you c'n calc'late, lessen he's hidin' out, an' now this little gray-muzzled coyote that Bill drives for, he's actin' mighty strange hisself."

"Acheson?" Wes' shrewd eyes narrowed as he handed back the plug. "I ain't seen him today; what's he been doin'?"

"I come on him this mornin' 'bout three miles out on the range to'ards the west section, bent low an' sorter amblin' 'roun' in a circle, like he was millin' slow all by hisself. I figgered maybe he'd had a sunstroke an' I pulled up real int'rested to watch him, but the minute he seen me he come over, yankin' off that kid-sized hat of his an' wipin' his forehead. 'Very odd grass,' he says to me. 'Very. We have nothing like it in

the East. What do you call it?' 'Just plain, ev'ryday mesquite,' I tells him. 'You come through several hundred miles of it a'ready in that gas bronc of your'n, an' it grows right up clost to the ranch house.' He let that go right over his head, though, an' ast me a lot of fool questions 'bout cattle raisin' an' feedin' till I got shut of him at last. Just before I hitched up to take Miss Sue to the deepo I got sight of him 'bout half a mile back here, an' danged if he wasn't millin' again like all possessed.'' It had been a long speech for the usually taciturn Link and he paused to take breath before he added: ''He's some hiker for an old feller. Shouldn't be surprised if we'd come on him any part of the range, practicin' that sun dance of his, but whatever his idee is, 'tain't got nothin' to do with mesquite.''

'' 'Bout half a mile back here'' the foreman repeated reflectively. ''Near the spring?''

''Right clost up to that bunch of rocks an' mesquite bushes that lines it,'' Link replied.

''And 'bout three miles out to'ards the east section would be where the crick turns.'' Wes chuckled drily. ''He's shore heard talk of Grosscup and his pool, and got it into his head that maybe some gold could be panned out here. 'S if we wouldn't savvy what was on the Circle Six.

Let him keep on millin', long's he don't mill 'roun' me. I ain't noways crazy 'bout that fam'ly."

But Link had no sooner loped off toward the nearby section where he was riding line that day than the dapper, gray-haired Mr. Acheson came spryly down the porch steps of the ranch house and hailed the foreman peremptorily. Wes did not advance to meet him, but with a muttered imprecation he waited, lounging stolidly against the cook house wall until the older man had come up to him.

"You are the foreman, I understand," Acheson began affably. "How long have you been on this ranch, may I ask? Have a cigar?"

He drew a couple of fat, opulently banded Havanas from his pocket and tendered them, but Wes shook his head.

"Thankee, Mister Acheson. I don't smoke, I chaw, and I've got a right good wedge of plug now. I been here nigh onto eighteen year; they ain't no secret 'bout it."

"Of course not." The financier's laugh was a trifle forced as he returned one of the cigars to his pocket and proceeded to light the other. "I'm curious about the history of these great ranches out in this part of the country, that is all; some of them are bigger than whole counties back where we live. Miss Poindexter tells me that her father

came from Virginia and was the first to start cattle raising here. What was the land used for before that, do you know?"

"Just prairie, I reckon." Wes straightened. "I can let you have a nice, well-broke pinto if you'd like to sorter ride 'roun' and take a look over the ranch; shouldn't advise you to go to the far sections, though. The gang ain't rounded up yet that got Lee yesterday."

"A most regrettable affair. I've had a little talk with him,—splendid young fellow." Acheson's tone had assumed an unctous enthusiasm. "Too bad the—ah—the elder Miss Poindexter was so excited when she met us on the road yesterday that she was unable to explain the situation clearly to us, or that little misunderstanding would never have arisen. I would myself have gone back with her to look for her brother; it was positively dangerous for her to attempt the rescue without proper protection, in the event that those murderous rascals were still lurking about in the vicinity, and Briggs would have been of no use, hampered as he was by the handling of the car."

"Oh, you needn't have worried none 'bout Miss Sue," Wes drawled easily. "She's nigh onto the best shot in the county and I reckon you seen she could take keer of herself all right. But 'bout the pinto——?"

Dacon Acheson shook his head.

"My riding days are over, I am sorry to say," he replied. "I am going to take the car and drive into the town this afternoon. I understand the father of these young people here founded it; he must have been a remarkable man to leave a professor's chair in college and make such a success of a ranch as the Circle Six appears to be. He never tried anything but cattle raising?"

Wes turned his eyes slowly until they encountered the sly but keen sidelong glance of his self-constituted companion and then as slowly they traveled out again, with no change of expression over the rolling, grassy range.

"Nobody 'roun' here never done anything else but one pore, ornery fool who tried to pan gold out of the crick and went looney over it," he responded carelessly. "I ain't never heard tell of no gold in the state."

"I fancy there are no other valuable mineral deposits or oil in this part of Texas," remarked Acheson, but his eyes were still fixed upon the weatherbeaten, inscrutable countenance of the foreman, who essayed no reply and seemed indeed not to have heard. After a pause the other added impatiently with a sharper note of insistence: "What is the nearest locality where a paying mine has been discovered or a well brought in?"

"I reckon the nearest is that lead mine, the Jumpin' Jupiter, but it never amounted to much, and there's a lot of right pretty lookin' wells up on the Ameroco lease. Got all their machin'ry yet, but that's all they ever did get, 'ceptin' some dry holes." Wes shaded his eyes with his hand and looked off down the road from whence his keener ears had caught the sound of galloping hoofbeats. "Some of the boys from Dexter are a-comin', and Bill—Briggs is roundin' up your car."

He started off at a run for the gates and reached them, just as a huge, red-bearded man on a splendid bay horse swept in, followed by a smaller, rat-eyed individual on a wiry little pinto. They pulled up so suddenly at sight of Wes that their mounts all but slid upon their haunches and the big man flung himself carelessly from his saddle.

"Howdy, Wes. Tad give you the news?" he rumbled in deep, hearty tones.

" 'Bout that Chanler hombre locatin' Jake's outfit in the hollow by Grosscup's Pool?" The foreman nodded. "He says you aim to round 'em up tonight, Matt."

Big Matt's record as sheriff of the county had caused his name to be held in healthy respect throughout that section and he was formidable enough in appearance to strike terror to the heart

of any local "bad man," but his blue eyes were astonishingly mild and his smile boyishly candid despite his forty-five years. Now, however, his face was set in stern lines and the blue eyes flashed.

"I aim to put 'em where they'd ought to have been long before this. Sim,"—he turned to the deputy sheriff who had accompanied him—"hold Redcoat a minute, I want to have a word with Wes."

"Shore will, Matt." Sim Moser dexterously caught the bridle which the other tossed to him and added with a yellow-toothed grin: "Wes, that there Chanler ain't the only one that's been findin' out things. Git Matt to tell you where I come on him yesterday an' who he was with."

There was a gloating, exultant note in his high, thin voice and the close-set eyes gleamed with triumph. Wes gazed at him speculatively.

"Don't like him, do you, Sim?" he asked. "I thought he was a right nice feller when I met up with him down to Faro Jim's. Come on, Matt."

He led the sheriff to the porch of the deserted bunkhouse where they seated themselves on the steps and watched the huge car with Bill Briggs at the wheel and Acheson alone in the tonneau as it whirled off down the drive, passed Sim and the rearing horses at the gate by a narrow margin

and disappeared on the road to Dexter in a cloud of dust.

Big Matt seemed in no haste to reopen the conversation and at length the foreman observed:

"I'd shore like to be ridin' out with you tonight. Calc'late Pete Ruiz will be with the rest of the gang or do you figger that he's skipped?"

"I ain't figgerin' that we're bound to find any of 'em there." The sheriff drew a pipe from his pocket and filled and lighted it before he went on. "Mister Chanler don't shoot off his mouth none permiscuous and he come to me alone this mornin'—I'd been out all night lookin' for Jake and his outfit—and told me he'd rode to Grosscup's Pool yesterday afternoon and saw a heap of charred stones and ashes and some empty cans, and cached among the rocks was some more cans and grub and two Mex saddles, one of 'em marked with a double arrow."

"Jake's own brand." Without apparent effort, Wes spurted a henna-colored jet of tobacco juice a prodigious distance and then chewed ruminatively. "Did he tell you, too, 'bout Pete Ruiz's dead pinto?"

Big Matt nodded.

"I had to pass the word on 'bout that and our little visit to the Pool tonight to the boys I'd sworn in as dep'ties, of course, and though I

warned 'em to hold their tongues, you can't never tell. One of 'em might let it out accidental like at Faro Jim's or the hotel and you can bet that Jake's got more than one greaser spyin' 'round Dexter to let him savvy how the land lays; that's why I ain't bankin' strong on 'roundin' up the outfit at the Pool."

"Some of his damned spies must ha' been hangin' 'round here, too, though I told the boys to run off any strange maverick that showed up when the rustlin' first started, and I ain't seen hide nor hair of a greaser on the range." Wes' face settled into still sterner lines as he spoke. "It got to Jake somehow that Lee was ridin' line out in the east section yesterday, and there ain't one of the Circle Six outfit from the Chink cook to the punchers that I wouldn't trust like I would myself. It's right funny that Chanler hombre should ha' been the first to reckernize Pete Ruiz's pinto, ain't it?"

"He was the first to git there, after Miss Sue," the sheriff replied laconically. "He's right smart and pleasant-spoken, but I've been studyin' 'bout him more'n a little, seein' as how he didn't 'pear to have no object in stayin' 'round these parts. Recollect that mild ole pebble-hound who come here a few years ago and got us all het up over his idee that mebbe we was settin' over

enough copper or lead to make this the richest county in the state?''

''The one who turned out to have wrecked that Chicago bank, and didn't savvy no more 'bout minin' than we do 'bout steamboats?'' Wes grinned at the memory. ''You cacl'late this Chanler hombre mought be hidin' out, too? Link kind of s'picions that.''

''Wal, I don't now, not after what Sim Moser seen yesterday.'' Big Matt's hearty laugh rang out upon the still, heated air. ''He's got a right good reason for bein' here and them rides of his'n ev'ry afternoon ain't exactly to admire the view. He's been usin' Sim's broncs, and Sim thought they come in mighty fresh considerin' the time he has 'em out, so yesterday he moseyed along after and come up with Chanler on the aidge of the Bar D where it jines the Hundred-and-Nine, and Chanler wasn't alone.''

''Who was with him?'' As he voiced the question a quick thought came to Wes and he glanced toward the ranch house, but the sheriff's reply abruptly changed his mental trend.

''A stranger who ain't never showed up in Dexter; lanky feller with a p'inted beard and spectacles like the head lights on that car of Acheson's. He had a transit instrument with him and they was surveyin'.''

"Surveyin' on the line of the Bar D and the Hundred-and-Nine!" exclaimed Wes. "Where'd the hombre with the transit come from, and what in time are they up to?"

"Sim figgers that new railroad company that was *pro*jected is goin' through at last—the T. and R. G. and I reckon he ain't far wrong." The sheriff knocked the ashes from his pipe and laid it on the step beside him to cool. "Before they shove a bill through the legislature they naterally want to cal'clate the route the road'll take and it'll be done on the quiet so's nobody will be prepared to fight the condemnation proceedin's. That's why Chanler's pardner keeps hisself and his transit out of sight and they meet out on the range ev'ry day. Sim rid on past and waited at a cross-roads until he seen Chanler lopin' back to Dexter alone, and the stranger in a buckboard, with the transit all bundled up behind, drivin' off in the other *di*-rection. Sim follered him till he turned in at Ole Man Henshaw's gate."

"If the new road goes past the Bar D there by the Hundred-and-Nine it'll run halfway between us and Dexter." Wes spoke as if to himself. "S'pose the company calc'late the town'll grow out to meet it, and figger on puttin' up a deepo bye-and-bye? It'd be a big thing for Dexter, and for the Circle Six too."

"Ain't no tellin'." Big Matt pocketed his

pipe and rose. "Don't see what good it'd do you folks out here 'ceptin' to cut off a few miles extry of haulin' supplies and Dexter ain't got no reason to grow; nothin' 'round here but cow country. Howsomever, I didn't come to gossip 'bout that Chanler hombre but to see if you and some of the boys don't want to jine our posse tonight?"

"The boys can go, 'ceptin' a couple to ride the range, but I'll have to stay here." Wes shook his head regretfully. "Miss Sue's gone to Mammon City, and what with Lee hog-tied like he is and this Acheson party on Miss Sylvie's hands I've got to kind of look after things."

"Wal, I don't eggsactly need the boys, but if they want to come along for a little excitement, mebbe, tell 'em to meet us just outside of town on the road to the Pool, 'long 'bout nine; there ain't goin' to be no moon." Big Matt chuckled as a sudden thought crossed his mind. "I heard that when the hombre who runs Acheson's car drove in to Dexter for the Doc last night he said Miss Sue had stuck 'em up with two guns and made him take her to look for Lee, leavin' the ornery ole cuss and his women-folks in the road. I reckon I savvied what I was doin' when I learned Miss Sue how to shoot. So, long, Wes; you'll git the news if we round up Jake's outfit."

The foreman watched Big Matt as he strode to

the gate, mounted, and followed by his deputy galloped off in the direction of the little town. Then he turned and started for the corral, his mind busied not so much with the projected attempt to capture the rustlers as with the revelation of Garrison Chanler's activities. If the road did go through in the direction indicated and a "deepo" were built so much nearer the Circle Six than the one in Dexter it would considerably increase the value of the ranch provided they could manage to hold on to it until the time was ripe. But railroads are not built nor do towns grow in thirty days. Wes shook his head lugubriously and then paused with his hand on the barred gate of the corral, for a solitary figure on one of Sim Moser's scraggy little cow-ponies had ridden in from the road and drawn rein before the steps of the ranch house. The foreman stared as the visitor dismounted, hitched his pony to a post and knocked upon the door. It was "that Chanler hombre" himself.

Meantime Sylvia, after vain efforts to draw into conversation the bored and sulky Miss Acheson, had ventured into the august presence of that young lady's mother with the politely expressed hope that she was comfortable, only to meet with a haughty rebuff from the nerve-shattered one.

Chagrined, she wandered into her brother's room and, finding him in an obstreperous mood, vented her vexation in a lively argument with him regarding his diet, which was still uppermost in his mind.

"I'm not going to be starved to death by a Chink and a kid like you," Lee announced wrathfully. "You tell Wun See to bring me a thundering big plate of beans tonight and a cup of coffee, or I'll cut off that pigtail of his as sure as he's alive."

"You couldn't even stand up and you know it," retorted Sylvia with a fine disregard of the consolation due to the invalid. "You're going to have some milk toast——"

"I'll throw it at his head," Lee interrupted.

"If you do you'll get nothing else. I don't intend to have Sue blame me if she comes home to find you in a fever." Sylvia tossed her golden head. "I should think I had enough on my hands with the Achesons just as disagreeable as they can be, without you fussing about your food."

"What are they disagreeable about?" Lee forgot the gnawing emptiness within him in suddenly aroused curiosity. "The old man came in to see me this morning and he seemed to be all right, although I thought he was embarrassed over something."

"I should think he would——" Sylvia checked herself and added hastily: "I mean his wife and daughter. Mrs. Acheson is *dreadfully* fat and pretends to be sickly, but I don't believe there is a thing the matter with her, and Miss Acheson is as snippy as though we were running some sort of an inn and I was away beneath her. I would be simply furious if it weren't rather funny, and she isn't half as pretty as I thought she was at first."

"Miaow!" Lee essayed an imitation of a yowl, but it ended in a groan instead. "You girls are all alike; just because she has snubbed you she's lost her looks! I think she might come in to cheer a fellow up and give me a chance to judge for myself! How is it that we have been honored with this visit, anyway, Sylvia? Sue told me that there had been a little accident to their car."

It was at this juncture that the knocking upon the front door reached Sylvia's ears and she started from the low chair in which she had seated herself.

"Somebody's calling!" she exclaimed, and a little pink flush deepened in her cheeks. Dexter folks or those from the neighboring ranches would walk straight in or go around to the back door and she could think of only one comparative stranger to whom such formality would be a mere

matter of course. "Wun See is getting as deaf as a post; I'll have to go myself, Lee."

She darted through the door and along the gallery toward the living-room, but caught herself up so suddenly as she neared its threshold that she tottered a step or two before regaining her balance. The heavy front door had opened and Daisy Acheson's languid tones, quickened now and vibrating with something akin to warmth, rang out in pleased surprise.

"Garry! I was just wishing that you might come and amuse me for a bit. Really, I have never been so bored in my life."

"You don't look it, Daisy." Unmistakably that was Garrison Chanler's voice and the unseen eavesdropper bit her lips. For all his courtesy he had invariably talked to her with an air of amused tolerance, never using that tone of easy camaraderie with which he had just now addressed that girl from his own world. And they called each other by their first names. But he was speaking again. "I saw your father in Dexter and he told me I should find you here. How is your host, the young chap who was attacked yesterday? I told you, I think, that I know him."

"I believe he is quite all right." The listless, indifferent note had returned to her voice

and there was a soft rustle of silk as she sank once more into her chair. "Father went in to have a little chat with him this morning, and he seems to be doing as well as can be expected. These rugged Westerners, you know——"

"Lee Poindexter isn't at all the type of Westerner you see upon the screen—providing you ever honor the movies with your attendance, Daisy," Garry interrupted drily. "Were you surprised when you discovered the identity of the—er—female road agent who held you up?"

"I am surprised at nothing out here," drawled Miss Acheson. "It was a ridiculous exhibition of bravado and has quite wrecked poor mother's nerves. I only hope she will feel able to go on tomorrow for this ranch is simply *unspeakable.* I cannot understand how anything but cattle could exist in such a wilderness. Thank heaven, that girl has taken herself off to a place called Mammon City, but there is a younger sister, a most absurd child. She actually tried this morning to imitate the way I do my hair and she bores me to extinction with her insatiable curiosity about the East. Have you ever seen her?"

But Sylvia did not wait to hear Garrison Chanler's reply. Blinded by stinging tears of humiliation she stumbled off to her room and flung herself face downward across the bed,

stifling her sobs in the pillows. So Daisy Acheson considered her "absurd" and the Circle Six "unspeakable." She was the hostess in Sue's place and she must be civil to that horrid girl until the party left, but never, never would she speak to Garrison Chanler again. To think that anyone could be so mean as to ridicule her effort to dress her hair properly, and to tell *him*, of all people.

Anger dried her tears and sitting up suddenly Sylvia attacked the offending coiffure with trembling fingers, but as the golden curls rippled down about her shoulders she relaxed and fell to musing, and gradually a little smile dawned on her lips.

Daisy Acheson considered her a child, did she? Unsophisticated and uncouth, perhaps, and quite beneath her notice? Well, she would see. There had been a note of proprietorship in her voice when she addressed Garrison Chanler which would have been self-evident to any other member of her own sex. Not speak to him again? Ah, but Sylvia would. Was it for nothing that practically every bachelor around Dexter was at her feet? She could just as easily bring this Easterner there,—this man the other girl considered to be her exclusive property,—and she would. When she had twisted him about her little finger,

subjugated him as she had the shyest, most awkward cow-puncher on the range, then Daisy Acheson might have him back again if she liked. Sylvia's small fists clenched and her eyes hardened and brightened with resolve; for that moment of humiliation they should pay.

CHAPTER VI

ACHESON MAKES AN OFFER

HALF an hour later Sylvia paused before her brother's door and then, without knocking, she turned the knob and entered, only to hesitate in seeming confusion, although she had plainly heard the two youthful, masculine voices from without. Her face was serene, with no trace of recent tears, and her hair was arranged in its usual loose knot of curls.

"Mr. Chanler! I didn't know that you were here. I should have knocked, Lee; I'm sorry——"

"What's the big idea?" Lee's eyes opened wide at this unprecedented evidence of consideration. "Mr. Chanler just dropped in to see how I was getting along. Sit down, Sylvia."

"I came to see you, too, Miss Poindexter, and to pay my respects to your guests." Garry smiled as he offered her a chair and she smiled back dazzlingly upon him. "Did you know that they were old acquaintances of mine? Miss Acheson and I practically grew up together."

"How nice! I have done my best to entertain her in the absence of my sister, but naturally she can only talk about the East and as I've never been there I am afraid we have bored each other dreadfully." Sylvia's smile rippled into a little laugh as she seated herself, but she carefully avoided her brother's eyes. "Perhaps you can persuade her to go for a ride with you. I offered Bobbie Burns to her this morning, but she shuddered and said he had a wicked head. Poor, old Bobbie. I rode him when I was six."

"Miss Acheson isn't accustomed to Western horses and I fancy she has an exaggerated idea of rough-riding in general." Garry laughed, too, but there was a defensive note in his tone and Sylvia was quick to realize her tactical error. "She tells me that they are bringing their visit to a close tomorrow, anyway."

"And incidentally I have learned how this visit came about," Lee grinned. "No wonder you and Sue kept it dark. Two sisters like you would be the death of any fellow. I should like to have met Miss Acheson and her mother, but I can only hope that they will pay us a return visit on their way back across the continent."

He had turned and spoken to Garry, but before the latter could reply Sylvia observed mischievously:

"That's because I told you how *terribly* pretty Miss Acheson was. And I think what Sue did yesterday was simply outrageous. It is her fault, not mine, if Mr. Chanler's friends consider us barbarians."

"I am sure no one could do that!" Garry protested. "Your sister showed real presence of mind in a drastic emergency and I should like an opportunity to congratulate her. I hope she returns before I leave Dexter."

Sue, again! Sylvia could have stamped her foot with vexation but instead, still smiling sweetly, she allowed a gentle tinge of regret to creep into her tones.

"You are going back East in a few days, aren't you? Now that poor Lee is unable to take me to the Triangle Four on Saturday night we shan't have that last dance together, after all."

"That was another of my several motives in riding over this afternoon; to offer myself as a substitute." Garry turned to Lee. "I find that I must return to New York even earlier than I had anticipated; in fact I start on Monday, so the dance Saturday will be our last opportunity to practice some new steps I have been teaching your sister. I should be delighted to drive over for her——?"

"I'd be mighty glad if you would!" Lee

responded heartily. "Sylvia's crazy about dancing and I should never hear the last of it if she couldn't go to the Triangle Four. Ride over early and have supper with the girls, and then you can take our buckboard to drive Sylvia to the dance."

"That will be splendid!" Sylvia exclaimed. Then, lest her tone had conveyed too much, she added hastily: "I'm not quite sure of those new steps yet and I want to teach them to Lee as soon as he is well so that I shall have someone to dance with. You will be sure to come early? I will tell Wun See to give us something especially nice."

"And you'll tell him to give me some of it or you don't go to the dance," Lee threatened darkly. "Not leaving us, Mr. Chanler?"

Garry had risen and he nodded as he held out his hand.

"Sorry, but I must. Don't you think you have talked enough for now, anyway? Thanks for asking me to supper on Saturday, I'll look in on you for awhile then. Perhaps——?" he hesitated. "Perhaps your older sister would like to go to the dance also?"

"Oh, no. She doesn't care for that sort of thing," replied Lee carelessly as he eased himself

back upon his pillows. "Sylvia is the only butterfly of the family. Till Saturday, then."

Garry took his leave and Sylvia accompanied him to the door, but, if she had hoped for a petty triumph over Miss Acheson, she was doomed to disappointment, for the living-room was empty and Dacon Acheson himself descended from his car as they emerged upon the porch.

To Sylvia's vexation he suavely but determinedly took possession of Garry and walked beside the latter's pony to the gate where he stopped and watched the departure of the visitor with a cynically speculative gleam in his eyes.

Garry's thoughts were at the same moment on him. This family tour must be a blind; a motor trip was as much of a novelty to Daisy as a ride in the subway would be to the average city working-girl, and it could be nothing but sheer torture to Mrs. Acheson's ease-loving soul. What motive had brought the old fox so far from his lair?

He might have gained more than an inkling of the truth, had he been within earshot during a conversation which took place the following morning between the financier and his young host. Despite the enforced diet Lee had passed a restless night and it was with small inward pleasure that he greeted Acheson when he knocked upon

his door; but if the latter was aware of any effort in the invalid's manner he ignored it.

"Good morning, my boy." The note of solicitude in his tone was almost paternal and Lee mentally writhed. "Hope you feel stronger today, strong enough for a little business talk."

"Thank you, Mr. Acheson, I'm doing well enough, I guess, but this confounded leg of mine is commencing to wake up and resent the treatment it has had." Lee with difficulty pulled himself up in bed and eyed his visitor inquiringly. "You spoke of business? I don't——"

"Of course you don't understand what I mean but you will in a minute," the other interrupted and seated himself, chuckling drily. "Down in the Street—Wall Street, you know,—they call me 'Dynamo' Acheson and I think I've earned the sobriquet. When I want anything, whether it's the scalp of a financial rival or a golf cup, I go out and get it, and nothing stands in my path. I'm not boasting, my boy, and I don't as a rule talk about myself, but I want you thoroughly to comprehend that however abrupt my proposition may appear to you, I mean business. I understand that you and your two sisters are the joint owners of the Circle Six. I've been looking it over and I have taken a fancy to it; it is just the

sort of open-air hobby in which a man who lives at high tension most of the year could find relaxation, with sufficient element of competition and risk in the cattle game to lend it interest. Your younger sister tells me that you have thought of selling out here and for her part she is more than willing to dispose of her share. Name your price."

Unmindful of the sharp stab of pain which shot upward from his wounded knee Lee raised himself and looked steadily into the small, close-set eyes of his guest.

"You must have misunderstood my sister, Mr. Acheson," he said slowly. "She personally may wish to sell in order to gratify her desire for travel and social life, but she is still only a child and by the terms of our father's will her share in the property is in trust and not at her disposal for another three years. I am in a position to speak for my older sister and as far as she and I are concerned the Circle Six has no price."

Acheson's thin-lipped smile did not change and he nodded briskly as though he had anticipated and discounted the young man's reply.

"I understand the—er—sentimental motive which impels you to hold on to the ranch as long as you can, and it does you credit, but one of the

principal attributes to success is the ability to know when you are in a losing game and get out from under.''

''Just what do you mean?'' Lee's brown eyes had turned almost black.

''My boy, when I decide to buy anything, from a block of stock to a ranch, I naturally inform myself about it at the earliest possible moment. You must pardon me for mentioning it, but I have learned that you are in financial difficulties and that the Circle Six may, willy-nilly, pass out of your hands at a not far distant date. Why wait for the inevitable which will leave you and your sisters at best with but a mere pittance, when you might with one stroke profit more than you could hope to in the next five years here, providing it were possible for you to retain your title to the ranch for that period?''

''My reason and that of my sister Susanna for declining to sell is irrelevant to this discussion.'' Lee's face whitened beneath its tan. ''If we are in any financial difficulty, that too is solely our affair. The Circle Six will not pass out of our hands while we have a single resource left.''

''But is that fair to your sisters?'' Acheson bent forward in his chair. ''Have you and your older sister the right to condemn the younger to poverty instead of comparative affluence in the

future for any reason, sentimental or otherwise? Women are controlled to a large extent by their emotions no matter how practical they may appear, but you are a man and in justice to them you must try to look at my proposition from a sensible, worldly standpoint. I made some inquiries of other ranch owners in the neighborhood of Dexter yesterday afternoon and I know approximately what the Circle Six is worth. Perhaps one of your reasons for declining to name a price is your realization that unless you obtained more than its actual value you and your sisters would have little left when your debts were liquidated——?"

"I repeat, Mr. Acheson, my reasons are my own," Lee interrupted in his turn. "It is useless to continue this discussion; the Circle Six is not for sale."

"You are banking on the chimera of hope that some miracle may enable you to hold on to the ranch until the tide turns, but you must open your eyes to the plain facts. That is why I am so brutally frank, my boy; I am speaking for your sake and that of your sisters' as well as for my own—er—whim." There was added force in Acheson's tone. "When I buy anything with the idea of profit it is needless to say that I do not pay a cent more for it than I must, certainly not

more than its market value, but when I am indulging a personal fancy or desire—call it anything you like—I am prepared to pay for my fun. I know you are in pain and I will not prolong this interview, but I want to place a proposition before you. Briefly, as a starting-point, let us say that this ranch of yours—land, buildings, livestock and all—is worth in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand dollars. At a forced sale you would not realize more than three-quarters of that; if you ask them, your bankers or your attorney will verify my statement. Perhaps there may be outstanding notes aggregating fifty thousand dollars long past due against the estate——"

"How do you know all this?" Lee exclaimed.

"I made it my business to find out; you can understand now the reason for my nickname on the Exchange." Acheson laid a claw-like hand upon the arm of his youthful host. "I'll give you a hundred and twenty-five thousand outright for the Circle Six. That means twenty-five thousand net capital left for each of you instead of that sum divided between you three. Remember I am offering two-thirds more than the amount the place would bring at a forced sale and a quarter more than it is worth, more than anyone else will ever offer for it. You will have to con-

sult your older sister, of course, but in all disinterestedness let me urge that you do not refuse too hastily."

Lee's pale face flushed and he pulled impatiently at the loosened bandage on his forehead as he drew himself up once more, but before he could utter the retort which rose to his lips the door burst open and Sylvia entered like a whirlwind.

"Lee! Oh, Lee! I couldn't help hearing. Isn't it simply too wonderful! Sue has just *got* to agree——"

"Sue has not 'got' to agree, nor have I." He spoke in a tone which the girl scarcely recognized. "You have no voice in this matter, Sylvia; it is for us to decide with Mr. Hartwell."

"I won't stand it." She stamped her foot and her blue eyes glinted like steel. "That old fossil in Mammon City isn't going to tie me down in this—this unspeakable wilderness for the rest of my life. Father must have been crazy to make him my trustee——."

"Sylvia!" Lee thundered, but Acheson, rising, intervened.

"I am sorry to have precipitated this argument, but I hope, Miss Sylvia, that you will be able to persuade your brother, and your sister, too, when she returns, to look upon my offer as

favorably and sensibly as you do. Think it over, my dear fellow, there is no immediate haste. I'll see you again before we go on tomorrow, of course, and leave with you my office and home address in New York. I shall only ask that you will let me know your final decision within a reasonable length of time."

Lee shook his head.

"I have already given you *my* final decision, Mr. Acheson," he said wearily, and lay back upon his pillows. "I have spoken for my older sister, and I think I know our attorney's views, as trustee for my younger one. We shall not sell."

"Mr. Acheson, don't listen to him!" Sylvia cried. "He can speak for himself, but he'll find that I can, too."

"I will leave you to talk it over, my dear." Acheson paused in the doorway, concealing the smile which hovered about his lips. "My offer will stand open for at least thirty days."

When the door had closed behind him Sylvia turned upon her brother, but was arrested by his look of stern displeasure.

"Never again dare to speak of father as you did just now. He was right to leave your affairs in Uncle Dave Hartwell's hands." He paused and added: "You're my sister, but I'm darned

if it doesn't seem sometimes as though I hardly knew you. The Circle Six may be dreary and lonesome to you, but to Sue and me it is a sacred trust, and carries with it a moral obligation to stay, pay off our debts and carry on the work that father began. Why can't you see it as we do?"

"Because I've never been anywhere or had anything," Sylvia burst out. "Sue went to the city to school and you to college, but what about me? I don't see any 'sacred trust' about it just because father couldn't make a success of the ranch. If we sell out to Mr. Acheson the debts can be paid and we will each have enough money to do as we please. You know we are getting poorer and poorer all the time and sooner or later the Circle Six will have to go, and then we'll have next to nothing. Oh, I'm sick of it here. I wish I were dead."

She buried her face in her hands and began to sob hysterically, and Lee tossed uncomfortably on his bed. He had the usual masculine aversion to tears, coupled with an abysmal ignorance of femininity in general and he wished fervently that Susanna had been at home. It was useless for him to talk to Sylvia for he could never make her understand, and from her point of view there was a certain amount of justice in her plea. The

poor little thing had never been off the range and it was only natural she should hunger for the advantages that other girls had.

In sudden gentleness he stretched out his hand toward her.

"Look here, Sylvia. We're not getting poorer, and we're not going to fail. Before you're twenty-one you'll have a bigger income from the ranch than the interest on the twenty-five thousand dollars which would be yours if we accepted Mr. Acheson's offer. You'll see. Sue and I don't mean to tie you down here, honey. Just as soon as we've got things going on a profitable basis and paid off those notes you'll have everything that you feel you are missing now."

"When I am t—toothless and crippled with rheumatism, I suppose." She dried her eyes on a wisp of a handkerchief, but her tone was not so scornful as the words implied. "I don't think it's fair, Lee. I want to travel and know people like the Achesons and—and Mr. Chanler, and have good times and pretty things *now*. We aren't any better off than we were last year, and it will only be worse if we go on. Now that there's more trouble——"

"'More trouble?'" he interrupted sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I—I don't know, of course, for Sue always puts me off, and she told me not to worry you with it." Sylvia hesitated, her eyes downcast, and then suddenly plunged. "Sue acts as though the ranch were hers alone and we hadn't any right to know what is going on, but she tells Wes everything. She said yesterday that she only had to go to Mammon City to sign some papers over again that hadn't been properly drawn up before, but she talked to Wes a long time afterward, and he's been as glum as an Indian ever since. I'm positive it's something more than just signing papers, and we can't skimp any closer than we are doing; I've worn that same white dress to every dance till I'm ashamed to be seen in it and Sue never has anything new, either. If we've got to live this way for years to come it doesn't seem worth while going on."

"It won't be for long, if you'll just have a little more patience, Sylvia." Lee's tone was faint and his face drawn with pain. "Even if we were all three willing to sell the Circle Six it wouldn't do to accept the first offer that came our way and from a stranger, too."

"I don't see why not," the girl cried eagerly. "It's a wonderfully generous offer, I think."

"Too generous." Decision lent strength to

her brother's tones. "Go find Wes and tell him I want to speak to him, will you? Ask him to come right away."

"Ye—es." Sylvia moved with obvious reluctance toward the door. "You won't let him know that I said anything about his talk with Sue yesterday?"

"Of course not." Lee braced himself on one arm and punched his pillows into shape. "Sue doesn't lie, and if she told you she only had to sign some more papers you are worrying yourself for nothing. Go on like a good girl, and find Wes."

It was a full twenty minutes, however, before the foreman put in an appearance and during the interval the invalid lay with closed eyes and brow furrowed beneath the bandage, going over in his mind every detail of the conversation with Acheson. There was something back of that amazing offer which he did not understand, but one fact stood out clearly; the astute Wall Street financier wanted the Circle Six for some greater reason than the mere indulgence of a new hobby. What could his motive be?

Wes' heavy step sounded at length in the gallery and Lee pulled himself up once more and waited eagerly until the ungainly figure appeared on the threshold.

"Hello, Wes. Come in and shut the door, I want to tell you something."

"So Miss Sylvie said," Wes observed as he obeyed, adding with tactless candor: "You look mighty bad, Lee, and the little gal's been cryin'; you two had an argument?"

"Call it a difference of opinion." Lee shrugged. "Where is everybody? The Achesons, I mean."

"He's gone out in his car and I ain't seen hide nor hair of the old lady since she 'lighted here night before last, but the young one 'pears to have taken a shine to Miss Sylvie all of a sudden; come up and put her arm 'round her just now on the back porch, and the little gal looked like she was struck dead. She took her off somewhere's for a talk."

"Father's instructions. I thought as much." Lee nodded. "Wes, if you wanted something to amuse yourself with and take your mind off your work, and you knew you could get it for a dollar or perhaps even seventy-five cents, would you offer a dollar and a quarter for it?"

"Say, you ain't in a fever, are you, Lee?" Wes advanced to the bed. "I ain't aimin' to amuse myself none, nor have my mind took offen the ranch, and I wasn't never loco enough to throw four bits away."

"Do you think Acheson is?" Lee asked slowly, watching the other's face. "Do you think he's the sort of man to give away not four bits but twenty-five or perhaps fifty thousand dollars?"

"He wouldn't give away nothin' less'n it was catchin' and he couldn't help hisself," Wes responded with conviction. "What's on your mind, son?"

He eased himself carefully into the chair which the financier had lately occupied and sat rimming his hat between his gnarled fingers while he listened absorbedly to Lee's account of Acheson's amazing proposition. When it was concluded he threw back his head and guffawed.

"Don't that beat hell?" he demanded when he could speak. "Do you know what that fool hombre's aimin' to do, Lee? He figgers on pannin' gold instead of stealin' it like he's been doin' from the pore suckers in that there Wall Street game. Link found him prospectin' 'round for it yesterd'y. What answer did you give him?"

"What do you suppose?" Lee retorted. "I told him that the Circle Six wasn't for sale at any price, but Sylvia heard and there was the dickens to pay."

"Little gal's got hifalutin' idees 'bout goin' East." Wes nodded slowly. "That daughter of Acheson's ain't goin' to be good medicine for

her, either, puttin' notions in her head. I figgered them folks was moseyin' on today."

"Mrs. Acheson hasn't recovered enough from that scare which Sue gave her." Lee grinned faintly. "The girls tried to keep it from me, but Chanler let it out yesterday when he called. That must have been some hold-up."

"Reckon it was." Wes chuckled and then his face sobered. "You got the message I give Wun See for you this mornin'?"

"That Big Matt didn't find anything at Grosscup's Pool last night but the remains of a fire and some empty cans?" Lee replied. "Maybe we've seen the last of Jake and his outfit around here."

"I don't guess so. Jake's no quitter." The foreman rose. "Somebody passed the word on to him that it wouldn't be healthy for him to hide out there any more, and I aim to find out who that somebody is. How'd this Acheson hombre find out so all-fired much 'bout the Circle Six? Them notes and all?"

"I don't know." Lee shrugged again. "Of course, there wasn't any secret about it; everyone in Dexter knew that father borrowed the money and sunk it in the ranch."

"Dexter folks nor no other cattle-town bunch don't shoot off their mouths 'bout their neighbors

to strangers from the East; not as a gen'ral thing!" Wes retorted. "If Ole Man Acheson comes 'round askin' me any more questions like he did yesterd'y I'm shore goin' to discourage him outen that idee of his'n that there's pay dirt in these parts or we'll have him and his women-folks stayin' on indefinite."

"I think you and Link are wrong about that idea of gold, Wes," Lee remarked. "Whatever else he is, Acheson is no fool, and he wouldn't offer a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars for a cattle ranch on its last legs just because he thought there might be gold here. Anyone can tell him that we've got about every mineral except gold in the State, but there are no mines down in this part. He's got something else on his mind, you can depend on that."

"Wal, there's one p'int clear enough." Wes hitched up his trousers. "If that ornery ole coyote is willin' to pay such a price for the Circle Six, he opines for some reason that it's goin' to be worth twice as much. We ain't on our last legs, not by a damn sight, and I figger we can hang on a while longer; long enough anyways to find out why we've riz twenty-five thousand overnight!"

CHAPTER VII

MOONLIGHT AND MISCHIEF

THE Achesons departed at noon the next day and after the big car had vanished in a swirling screen of dust down the road which led to Mammon City, Sylvia knocked upon her brother's door.

"Come in," he called. "Have they gone?"

"Yes." Sylvia shut the door behind her and sank down with a little sigh beside the bed. "Everything seems just dead without them, doesn't it?"

"I haven't noticed it," Lee replied drily. "I suppose you've fallen for that Acheson girl's flattery——!"

"I did nothing of the sort, and she never tried to flatter me!" retorted Sylvia. "Daisy was absolutely frank!"

"'Daisy?'" Lee raised his eye-brows as far as the bandage would permit.

"She told me to call her that!" Sylvia bridled. "She said she thought I was just a silly child at first——"

"She's a good guesser!"

"I think you're horrid, Lee! She thought that because she heard Sue bossing me around the night they came, and I allowed her to do it! Daisy says I ought to assert myself more; that the youngest in a family is never appreciated unless she does. It wasn't until—until Mr. Chanler said some nice things about me to her that she felt any interest in me."

"What sort of 'nice things'?" Lee demanded.

"Oh, I don't know!" Sylvia blushed and went on hurriedly: "Naturally they were prejudiced against Sue for frightening them so unnecessarily instead of explaining; Mrs. Acheson has a weak heart if she *is* fa—stout, but she was awfully nice to me this morning. She invited me to visit them when I go to New York and Daisy promised me the most wonderful time!"

"Good team work!" Lee growled. "Are you such a little idiot that you can't see Acheson put them up to it? He wants the ranch and you are the only one of us who is willing to sell."

"That's not so!' Sylvia tossed her head. "*You* may think I am an idiot but other people understand me!—Daisy said quite honestly that although we had been so kind and hospitable neither she nor her mother could endure ranch life for long, it would be too hideously lonely. I don't

blame them! Her father is just crazy about it, though, and the Circle Six is the finest place he's seen! Did he give you his office address? The house number is on the card Daisy gave me; she is going to write and tell me all about the splendid times she will have."

"Look here, Sylvia, the quicker you get these people out of your head the better!" Lee winced at the unconscious envy which had manifested itself in his sister's tones. "We've got a hard struggle before us yet and if we are to win out you must do your share by being as cheerful and patient as you can. The Achesons will have forgotten that you ever existed by the time it will be possible for you to go to New York and they'll drop you anyway like a hot potato when they find they can't use you to get possession of the Circle Six."

"I don't see why you are so set against them, Lee." Sylvia sighed. "Of course they were unwilling at first to lend their car to Sue, but that was only because they didn't understand——"

"That did not prejudice me; Sue took the situation in hand, all right. I merely object, on the grounds of principle, to people who would use our hospitality as a means to further their own ends; who eat our bread and try to take advantage of us in a bargain."

"'Advantage!'" repeated Sylvia. "Why, you know that Mr. Acheson offered us more for the ranch than anyone else ever will!"

"I am not so sure of that," Lee replied slowly.

"But it isn't a matter of business with him. He told you that!" Sylvia protested. "He only wants the ranch to amuse himself with when he needs a vacation. How can you say he is trying to take advantage of us?"

"Just because he offered more than the ranch is actually worth—as far as we know." Her brother added the last words with significant emphasis and Sylvia stared at him round-eyed.

"Oh, Lee!" she breathed. "You don't mean that the Circle Six may actually be worth more! But how——!"

"That is what I'm going to find out as soon as I can get about again," he announced firmly. "To-night when Chanler comes to supper I'll have a little talk with him about Acheson. Perhaps I may be able to get an inkling as to what is back of his amazingly generous offer. I shan't mention that to Chanler, of course, and mind that you do not when you go to the dance!"

"The very idea!" Sylvia looked injured. "As if I would!—Goodness I'd almost forgotten about the dance! I'll have to go and do up that old white dress again. I don't believe Mr. Acheson

had any other reason for wanting the ranch than the one he gave, and it is silly of you to suspect him. Haven't we read of rich men spending fortunes on just a hobby?"

"Not men of Acheson's type, Sylvia." Lee shook his head. "Chanler may not be willing to discuss him if they are friends and possible associates in business, but I can find out what his attitude is, anyway. Don't close the door behind you; Doc Rankin ought to be here any time now."

When Garry Chanler appeared at sunset and made his way to the invalid's room, however, he was quite ready to discuss Acheson, and his attitude toward the latter was unmistakably revealed in his reply to Lee's first tentative question.

"Yes, I suppose the old boy is considered a power, of a sort, on the market. He has added a few millions to the small fortune his father left him, but his methods, while strictly within the law, have been pretty close to the line now and then. The chaps I—I trade with on the Street don't play that way, and the more conservative element haven't any use for him. His operations aren't flagrant enough to affect the family's social position, of course, and his daughter is quite 'a leader of the younger set.'"

"So I gathered from Sylvia," Lee rejoined. "What does he trade in, mostly?"

"Easiest graft on the Street—mines." Garry passed his cigarette case to his host and held a match for him. "I don't mean any fake stuff, he's too clever for that, but he controls more than one dummy concern and any new mining stock that is floated and looks good to him he jockeys about among these different companies until he's ready to let the suckers in and make a killing. If you have never dabbled yourself you wouldn't understand, but it takes a very shrewd man to play that game and get away with it."

"He must be a good guesser, too," Lee remarked, settling back contentedly as the smoke rings drifted toward the ceiling. "When I was in college at Fort Worth I heard a lot about companies that were organized to foist worthless stock on the Eastern market. Does Acheson know anything about mines, himself?"

"Enough to read and comprehend the reports of his experts, I fancy!" Garry lighted his own cigarette. "More than a few of the biggest operators in mining stock have to depend blindly on the opinions of their geologists, but he studied it himself years ago, though I never heard of his having actually gone out into the field. If I had encountered him a little further north I confess I should have suspected some ulterior motive back

of this pleasure tour; as it is he is far from the beaten path of the trans-continental motorist but he has a reputation for doing the unexpected."

"In the few talks I had with him, Acheson didn't strike me as the sort of man to enjoy such a leisurely trip." With a fine masculine disregard Lee flipped the ashes over the side of his bed. "He seems to be at high tension—high speed—all the time."

"That's Dacon Acheson." Garry laughed. "They call him 'Dynamo' on the Exchange."

"So he informed me, and I think he's privately rather proud of it." Lee nodded. "Naturally I don't know him as you do, but I should think a flying express would suit him better than a motor car. Perhaps his family persuaded him to take this trip——?"

"Not they! If I know them, they're bored to death! Did he give you any hint of business bringing him out here?"

Lee eyed his visitor keenly at the seemingly careless question, but Garry's expression betrayed only amused interest.

"He wouldn't have been likely to. I know as much about the stock market as he does about cattle-raising and we hadn't a point of contact," Lee temporized. "He didn't even mention how far

west they were going but I don't think they intend to make the Coast, for I gathered that he expects to be back in New York in about a month."

"Possibly they have planned to ship the car home and return by rail." Garry shrugged, as though brushing aside the subject. "I'll be home myself the latter part of next week and New York won't look a bit good to me in the dog days, I can tell you! It's a great life out here; I'd like to buy a ranch myself and settle down, but I suppose we must each of us play our cards as they lie."

Chanler, too! What possessed these Easterners that they should suddenly go loco over the charms of the cow country? Lee stared, but before he could comment on the other's observation, a light tapping sounded upon the door and Sylvia presented herself. The despised white dress fell in soft folds about her slender figure and the lamp which she carried gleamed upon her golden hair, turning it into a nimbus of radiance.

Garry unconsciously caught his breath. Lord, what a little beauty the child was! What a sensation she would create later in the drawing-rooms of the East if she might realize her heart's desire! His admiration of the picture she made was detached, almost impersonal, but something of it must have shown in his face, for she turned her head quickly from the rays of the lamp, but not

before he had seen the warm, rosy blush which swept up into her cheeks.

"Whew!" Lee whistled in brotherly approval. "We've gotten ourselves up regardless to-night, haven't we?"

"Don't be silly!" Sylvia placed the lamp on the table and held out her hand with a little smile to Garry. "Your friends left this morning and my sister has not yet returned from Mammon City so we shall be all alone for supper; I hope you won't be bored to death, Mr. Chanler."

"The prospect does not hold any presentments for me on that score!" He smiled also as he took the little hand for a moment and then released it. "It is splendid to find—and leave—your brother so much improved. If you don't take care you will find him up and hopping about even before I arrive in New York."

"You are really going, then, on Monday?" The lilt was gone from Sylvia's voice.

"Yes, and to-night must be 'good-by' for a time at least. I find that I will not be able to ride over to-morrow as I had hoped, to make my final adieux then. We'll make the best of our dance this evening, Miss Poindexter." He turned once more to the bed. "My dear fellow, I hope you'll look me up when you come to New York, and this isn't a mere perfunctory request, either. I've a ten-year

lease on my rooms at the Blandford and if I should happen to be fooling about at some house-party or country club a note will always be forwarded to me from there. I shall look forward to a reunion with you and your sister, and to meeting Miss Susanna, too, if she comes."

"Thanks, old man!" Lee shook hands heartily. "I am afraid we will all three be pretty well tied down to the Circle Six for a few years to come, but if you should decide to take another trip out here, remember that the gates of the ranch are never closed."

Wun See had outdone himself in the preparation of supper and Sylvia presided with conscious dignity over the small round table which she caused to be substituted for the family board. Garry watched her amusedly, an irrepressible memory of a doll's tea-party in which some small cousins of his had indulged arousing involuntary comparison. But if she were a child she was a very lovely one and Chanler would not have been human if he had failed to be cognizant of her charm.

As the moon rose they set off gaily enough for the Triangle Four and the evening was one of social triumph for Sylvia, much as she affected to disdain the friends from neighboring ranches who, until the coming of Garry and the Achesons, had

made up her world. There was heartburning among the punchers, for she danced at first only with the Easterner, but belated wisdom that was partly her awakening feminine instinct led her to relinquish him to the tenacious grasp of a clumsy, freckled maiden of uncertain age, while she distributed her own favors with careless impartiality.

Once when she passed him, rocking back and forth in an uncouth trot with an awkward, raw-boned rancher who smiled down fatuously upon the dainty, shining head so near his shoulder, Garry felt a hot wave of resentment sweeping over him which amazed him by its very intensity. Why should he, a mere stranger, feel nettled at the sight of her in the arms of this boor? He was probably a very decent fellow and might have known her all her life, and this too was the environment in which she had grown to budding womanhood, the only one she had ever known.

He shrugged, as though in a physical effort to rid himself of the train of thought into which he had fallen, but the feeling of resentment persisted and unconsciously his eyes followed her about the huge, crowded room. It was not only her prettiness, the exquisite daintiness and grace of her which set her apart from the drab, negative figures of the other feminine guests, but some in-

tangible thing that marked her as of different clay. By Jove, that was it! She *was* different! Her very yearning after the finer things of life was an instinctive manifestation of it and this was no more her true environment than the hard ranch life of his generation must have been that of her scholarly father.

Replying mechanically to the observations of the girl he was piloting across the floor to the asthmatic strains of the phonograph, Garry wondered impulsively if there were not something he could do to help Sylvia fulfill her dream of the East. Perhaps his aunt could be persuaded to invite her on for a visit——? Then with a quick revulsion he realized the absurdity of his half-formed thought. Mrs. Porter Chanler was a wise and worldly woman but she would be certain to misunderstand his interest and scent a romance where none existed. Sylvia was a charming, adorably pretty child but he could as easily have fancied himself in love with a Watteau shepherdess!

The Triangle Four, like the Circle Six, could not yet boast of an electric plant, and the room grew stiflingly hot under the reeking oil lamps. The phonograph squeaked on valiantly and tireless dancers still circled the floor, when Garry at length determinedly elbowed a path to Sylvia's

side and bore her away from the stalwart son of their host, and out upon the porch.

Flooding moonlight had turned the mesquite into an undulating, silvery sea and a little night breeze rustled through a clump of bushes near by, fanning their faces refreshingly.

"You've quite deserted me!" he said reproachfully. "We have only waltzed together, and didn't once try the new steps I showed you. I believe you have forgotten them and you don't want to admit it."

"Indeed I haven't!" Sylvia laughed. "Try me and see!—Oh, dear, it's too late! That's the last dance now!"

The phonograph had been silenced and in its stead there came the reedy strains of a violin in an old-fashioned reel, and the laughter and bustle of the dancers taking their places.

"We don't want to get in that, do we?" asked Garry persuasively.

Sylvia very much wanted to, but she divined his boredom and stifled her first impulse. Of course a man of the world like Garrison Chanler would be disgusted by a crude romp like the reel! Much of the bitterness which had rankled within her at the disparaging comment upon herself uttered by Daisy Acheson had been banished by the latter's

subsequent flattery, but Sylvia's resolve remained unaltered. She would show this man beside her that she was not the child he fancied her, but a woman. Before he left her at her door that night she would have her moment of triumph and then he might go back to the East and to Daisy Acheson if he liked!

The serenely bland face upturned to him in the moonlight revealed no trace of her thoughts, however, and her tone was sweetly submissive as she replied to him.

"I don't care for the reel, it's so rough and noisy. They won't miss us; shall we just slip away now and start for home?"

"If you wish, Sylvia." Her name slipped quite involuntarily from his lips and he seemed unconscious of it, but she felt a little thrill of satisfaction. "Will you wait here while I get your cloak for you and bring the buckboard around? The drive back ought to be wonderful under that moon; I don't remember ever to have seen it shine so marvelously in the East."

Sylvia nodded and smiled a trifle to herself as he strode within doors. The magic of the night stirred her, too, but she would not permit it to lay hold upon her; the dramatic situation she meant to stage filled her thoughts and she reveled in it in prospect with all her mischievous soul.

When Garry returned and slipped her cloak about her shoulders Sylvia swayed back slightly against him for the merest fraction of a second, so slightly that she knew he could never have told whether it was accident or design, but as he started for the wagon shed he set his lips firmly.

He admitted to himself that she was dangerously sweet in her naive innocence, but he must remember that she was ignorant, as well, of the rules of the game as it was played by the sophisticated débutantes he knew at home. Flirtation was the spice of life to them, but this artless little girl would not understand and only a cad could find amusement in fencing with so unskilled an opponent.

The clapping of hands, stamping of feet and hilarious shouts from within rose above the whining of the fiddle and shattered the serene stillness of the night as Garry drew the wiry little team up before the porch steps and held out his hand to Sylvia, who sprang lightly up beside him. Neither spoke until the ranch gates had been left behind them and the hubbub of the dancers died away in the distance.

No other ranch house was visible and no light save that from their swaying lanterns contested the cool, clear rays which shimmered all about

them in an ethereal effulgence. Sylvia drew a deep breath.

"It's almost like fairyland, isn't it?" There was a wistful note in her voice. "Who would ever think that in the daytime it is the same, old, greeny-brown mesquite stretching for endless miles! Sometimes I almost hate the moon, it is such a deceitful flatterer!"

"Perhaps it just brings out the—the beauty of everything that is hidden by day, or else you are so accustomed to it that the great, free spaces out here don't appeal to you." Garry's eyes were fixed straight ahead down the white ribbon of the road which wound so swiftly beneath their wheels. "You've had no opportunity yet, you know, to compare it to the crowded, grimy, conglomerate mass of stone and concrete that goes to make up a city."

"I don't want to compare it, I want to forget it all!—Or I should, of course, except for Lee and Sue," she amended hastily. "It seems big and free to you out here because you are free to go—you are going—back to *everything,* but to me it's like living on a scrubby, lonely oasis in the midst of a desert that can't be crossed, with New York always a mirage in the distance!"

She sighed and in impulsive sympathy he patted the little hand which lay relaxed so close to his

knee. It curled upward and for an instant the fingers clung to his.

"That's a very pretty simile but a false one, as you'll see, little girl!" He spoke in a cheery, matter-of-fact tone as he gently disengaged his hand. Confound it! He was sorry for her, of course, but he might have had sufficient sense to confine his consolation to words! "A caravan will come along before you know it and take you across your desert! I hope when it does that the real city will make good all the promises that its mirage holds out to you."

Sylvia could have bitten him! The cool impersonality of his tone maddened her and a sense of impending failure filled her with self-contempt. It had been silly of her to think that she could twist him about her fingers as she had the cow-punchers! He might think her pretty, perhaps, but she had not the airs and graces of a Daisy Acheson, the sort of girl whom he would take seriously!

She stole a glance at his profile, clean-cut in the silvery light and the force of his dominant chin and firmly chiseled lips was impressed upon her anew. What had ever possessed her to dream that she could subjugate him where women of the world had failed? What a little fool she had been!

Just at that moment a vagrant puff of the night

breeze blew a strand of her hair across his lips and the horses leaped forward. Looking down Sylvia saw that his hands had tightened involuntarily upon the reins, until his knuckles whitened, and a wave of renewed confidence swept over her as she drew back her wayward hair and fastened it with a little laugh. He was not as impervious as she had thought, after all!

"My hair is such a nuisance!" she murmured. "If it would only stay sleek and straight like Miss Acheson's!"

"Don't malign it!" Garry warned laughingly. "Half the girls I know would give anything they possessed for such a crown of sheer, spun gold!"

"You do say such nice things!" sighed Sylvia and tried to meet his eyes, but he kept them straight before him. "I suppose some day I shall marry one of those boys you saw back there at the dance and he'll never know or care whether my hair is tow-colored or black as long as I can keep him mended and help cook for the round-up!"

"Not that, for you!" Garry exclaimed; and now he glanced down into the misty, violet-blue eyes, which seemed to cling as her slender fingers had done. "You'll blaze a trail of broken hearts from here to the East and find a Prince Charming wait-

ing for you with ancestral estates and wealth to match your hair! I am a prophet!"

He spoke lightly, but it was with a conscious effort that he wrenched his eyes from hers. She was a bewitchingly provocative little creature with an appealing charm which somehow had never impressed him so poignantly before; but he was not sorry when the lights of the Circle Six gleamed ahead. She ought to know better, precocious infant though she was, than to look at a fellow like that, or hold his hand or let her hair blow across his face!

Little more was said between them until they turned in at the gate and drew up before the porch. Garry's broncho was tethered to a post and as they alighted the lanky figure of Link Dole rose from the steps. He responded with his usual taciturnity to their greeting, climbed into the buckboard and drove off in the direction of the corral.

When Garry turned, Sylvia had mounted the steps and only the glimmer of her white gown beneath the opened cloak revealed her presence in the shadows.

"You're quite sure you can't ride over tomorrow, to say 'good-bye' to—Lee?" Her voice was the merest whisper, but it brought him up the steps and to her side with outstretched hand.

"I can't, possibly. I'm sorry." He, too, spoke very low but forced a note of easy cordiality. Good Lord, was the child going to make it difficult? Sylvia had moved so that a straying moonbeam played upon her hair and its reflection seemed to glow from her soft eyes. "This isn't 'good-bye,' however; remember my prophecy! Instead, shall we say as our Mexican friends do across the border, 'hasta la vista'?"

" 'Until we meet again?' " There was a vibrant timbre in her voice now and as she laid her hand in his it trembled with excitement. Had her moment come? "*Shall* we meet again, I wonder? We've had some splendid rides together——!"

"Indeed we have, and we'll ride again, never fear!" He had misread the note in her tones as well as the quivering of the small hand. "I shall not forget——"

"Won't you?" Sylvia suddenly swayed toward him with upturned face and violet eyes holding his. "Garry!"

For the barest instant he hesitated while she waited with tense breath, but the next moment he had stepped back with a little, bantering laugh and dropped her hand.

"Take care, little girl! Friendship is a very wonderful thing, but don't waste upon it the kisses you should keep for that Prince Charming I told

you would come!—Until we meet again, Sylvia!"

He took her hand once more and with a swift gesture carried it to his lips, then descended the steps to his waiting broncho. At the gate he wheeled, waved to the small figure half-hidden in the shadows of the porch and galloped swiftly away.

Sylvia stood immovable until the sound of hoofs had died in the distance while a rage such as she had never known consumed her.

"Oh!" she gasped through set teeth. "I hate you! I hate you!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A LITTLE WHITE LIE

ON Monday afternoon Susanna alighted from the train at Dexter and engaged the town's one jitney to drive her out to the ranch. She was pale beneath the clear tan, and deep shadows lay under her gray-blue eyes, but the small chin was lifted as dominantly as ever and there was no trace of fatigue in her voice as she addressed the freckled, tow-headed youth at the wheel.

"Any news, Fred?"

"I ain't heard none, Miss Sue, 'ceptin' Doc Rankin 'lowed to me this mornin' that Lee's gettin' on fine; it's all he c'n do to keep him in bed." The boy hesitated. "Big Matt's out with some of the boys follerin' a new trail of Jake Brower's bunch."

"That's splendid about Lee!" Susanna had noted the hesitation and with characteristic directness she asked: "But what else have you heard from the Circle Six?"

"Nothin'. Calc'late you'll hear somethin', though, when you git to the ranch."

"Why?" Susanna leaned forward in sudden anxiety. "What has happened?"

"Wal, we'll be thar in a little while and I ain't aimin' to scare you none, Miss Sue, but Clint Beckett rid in at sun-up like a posse was after him, and when he couldn't find Big Matt he corralled Sim Moser and took him back with him. They didn't let on what the trouble was and Sim ain't showed up since."

"But Doctor Rankin called later. Didn't he say anything on his return?" Susanna asked.

"No, just that Lee was doin' fine, but he looked plumb important and he's locked hisself in his shack. It ain't the red-eye, either, for he 'lowed yesterd'y he was all out of it and aimin' to take another little trip to the border soon's Lee could git along for a day or so."

Sylvia sat back without comment and became lost in anxious thought. What fresh misfortune could have come to the Circle Six? If Lee were indeed convalescing satisfactorily why should the old bootlegging doctor look "plumb important" over happenings at the ranch?

She roused herself from futile speculation only when they passed between the wide gates.

"Don't stop at the house, Fred, drive right over to the corral. There's Wes, and I want to speak to him before I go in."

The foreman came to meet them as they drew up with a final clatter of the rickety engine.

"Glad you're home, Miss Sue!" He shook hands, looking the question he would not voice. "Howdy, Fred. We didn't know Miss Sue was comin' back or I'd have had the buckboard to the deepo."

There was reproach in his tone and Susanna laughed as she paid the youth his fare, but now there was a little tired break in her voice.

"I didn't know myself until just before train time," she remarked. "Good-bye, Fred."

The jitney rattled off toward the gate once more and Wes demanded eagerly:

"What did you do, Miss Sue? Will they give us till the fall round-up?"

Susanna shook her head.

"Only thirty days' extension on the notes, Wes. Uncle Dave Hartwell was right; it's the showdown. I fought hard, but it wasn't any use."

For a moment the foreman gazed out silently over the vast stretch of coppery-green mesquite toward a cluster of sorrel dots moving slowly in the distance. It was part of the herd of sleek cattle which he had counted upon to save the Circle Six, and he had guarded and cared for them through "norther" and drought, famine, pestilence and predatory raids by man and beast. Was all to go for nothing? He ran his hand through his grizzled hair and the Adam's apple traveled

up chokingly into his throat, but when he spoke it was with a note of buoyant confidence.

"Wal, thirty days is somethin', after all. Reecollect what you said about a lot happenin' in that time? Somethin's happened a'ready; the Circle Six is worth twenty-five thousand more than it was afore you went away!"

" 'Twenty-five thousand!' " Susanna repeated. "Wes, have you gone crazy?"

"Not no more so than the hombre who offered that price for it and he's as sneaky-smart as a coyote. Lee'll tell you all 'bout it, though." Wes hitched up his trousers. "I reckon thirty days is time 'nough for us to find out *why* anybody wants the ranch so bad they'll pay such a sight for it."

"Lee's all right?" The mention of her brother had recalled to Susanna her conversation with the jitney driver. "Fred said the doctor acted strangely when he got back to Dexter this morning and that Clint rode in at dawn to try to find the sheriff. Has there been more trouble?"

"It ain't 'bout Lee, 'cept to keep him quiet, but the spring's p'izened. I didn't want him to know, but that ole lame hound of his'n got it first. Clint found him layin' out there all swole up."

"Not poor old 'Rastus!" Susanna cried. "Lee will be heartbroken! But the cows——?"

"None of 'em got to it afore we put a guard on, and Doc Rankin took a bottle of the water to see what'd been put into it." Wes chewed reflectively. "One of that da—that ornery outfit of Jake's must have slunk up in the night and emptied the p'izen in, for the spring was all right yesterd'y at sundown. I run all the cows into the next section so's they can git at the crick above where the spring j'ines it, and they're safe 'nough. Ole 'Rastus was crippled and half blind, anyways, and I reckon it was a shore quick finish."

"Oh, I wish Big Matt would get that wretch Jake Brower and his outfit, or else drive them out of the county!" Susanna exclaimed, adding: "That is the only thing that Lee has ever kept from me in his life, Wes, I think; the cause of the quarrel between him and Jake. It must have been very bitter to cause such bad blood. Do you know what it was?"

The foreman looked uncomfortable.

"I ain't never ast him," he temporized. "Lee's hot-headed, but you can bet whatever it was he had the right of it! Sim Moser came back with Clint from Dexter this mornin' but he couldn't foller the tracks from the spring through the mesquite and he rid off after Big Matt."

"Well," with a sigh Sue turned toward the house, "I'll go and tell Lee that everything is all

right about the business in Mammon City; he mustn't be worried with the truth until he is on his feet again."

She found her brother improved but with every nerve in his healthy young body crying out for the activity which his shattered kneecap denied him. He recounted to her the details of Acheson's extraordinary offer and Wes' suggestion that the elderly financier might have suspected the presence of valuable mineral deposits beneath the rolling mesquite.

"I don't think Wes is on the right track, Sue, for Acheson's no fool and he is something of a geologist," Lee continued. "He studied it in his youth, according to Garrison Chanler, so we can be fairly certain that it isn't a mine he is thinking of. He gave me his address in New York and thirty days in which for us to make up our minds."

" 'Thirty days'!" Susanna echoed, struck by the coincidence. That was the length of time given them in which to meet the notes, to achieve the impossible! "Mr. Chanler knows the Achesons. He has been here?"

"Yes. I asked him to supper Saturday night and he took Sylvia to the party at the Triangle Four." Lee replied to the last question first. "He's gone now; left for the East this morning. I guess he is a top-notcher in spite of his unas-

suming ways; family and money and all that sort of thing, I mean. He lives at a bachelor apartment house on upper Fifth Avenue called the 'Blandford' and asked me to look him up when I came to New York, but I told him I hadn't any idea of doing any traveling right soon! He knows the Achesons in a social way, but he hasn't much use for the old man—says he's a pretty sharp customer. I'd give something to know why he really wants the ranch!"

"Where is Sylvia?" Susanna asked suddenly.

"Out for a ride. I warned her not to go farther than Dexter because of Jake and his outfit, but I don't believe it had much weight with her. She was in a queer mood all day yesterday, quiet but sort of brooding; I suppose it is because I refused Acheson's offer for the ranch." Lee moved restlessly. "She's a good kid, but I swear I don't understand her, Sue. I wish she was more like us!"

In her heart Susanna echoed that wish when later they were seated together at supper and she had an opportunity to study the younger girl. Sylvia's delicate, wild rose color had given place to a small brilliant spot of red which glowed in either cheek; her eyes, although sunken, smoldered as with an inward fever and there were drawn lines about the small, set mouth. Surely some-

thing deeper than her mere disappointment anent the refusal of Acheson's proposition must have occurred to change her so. Could it be the result of her brief association with that other girl, from the world of which she longed to become a part? Sylvia had been unfeignedly glad to see her sister, but there was a guarded reserve in her manner wholly new to her, and she betrayed only a listless interest in the conversation which Susanna attempted to keep going.

As soon as the meal was finished she pleaded a headache and slipped away to her own room, while Susanna wandered out to the porch and seated herself on the steps. Sylvia's strange mood faded from her mind before the bigger problems which faced her, and the question repeated itself tirelessly in her brain. What did Acheson want with the ranch? Nothing but cattle-raising had ever been thought of in the vicinity and the few prospectors who had ventured there had either been laughed to scorn or had departed in disgust at the futility of their efforts. What information or knowledge did Acheson possess of which they themselves were in ignorance and which enhanced the value of the Circle Six so greatly in his estimation? Recalling his long, shrewd, fox-like face, with the predatory jaw and keen, close-set eyes, Susanna was under no delusion as to his offer

having been made on the strength of the mere whim he alleged. Could they discover his motive in the thirty days which remained to them?

Susanna had none of the usual tendency of her sex to evade an issue, and, repugnant as the thought was to her, she forced herself to face the fact that in the event of the notes being called in by the Mammon City banks common sense would compel them to accept the Eastern magnate's offer; she and Lee must consider Sylvia's future as well as their own, and they could not hope to obtain any such value at a local sale. The thought of losing the Circle Six tore at her heartstrings with an almost physical pain, and a defiant, if despairing, courage rose within her. Surely a way would be shown her in which the ranch might be saved!

Twilight deepened into a starlit darkness and the moonbeams played softly upon her like a shielded light in the hands of a tenderly watchful guardian, when all at once a subdued, choking sound came to her ears and Susanna straightened, listening intently. It came again—a muffled, dry sob!

Rising, she passed swiftly indoors and made her way to Sylvia's room where she knocked softly. The sobbing ceased abruptly but no response came from within. Turning the knob she entered. The room was in darkness save for a single ray of

moonlight that streamed in at the window, revealing a slender figure prone across the bed with the golden head buried in the pillows.

"Sylvia, dear! What is it?" Susanna closed the door behind her and advanced to the bedside.

"N-nothing! P-please go away!" The words were petulant but the half-stifled tones held a tragic note.

"I must know what is troubling you, Sylvia!" Susanna leaned forward and tried to raise her sister in her arms, but the slim form stiffened.

"No! Don't touch me!" Sylvia dug her head still deeper into the pillows. "Oh, can't you see I want to be alone?"

"But perhaps I can help." Susanna urged, now seriously alarmed. "You have always come to me with everything, you know, dear——!"

"N-nobody can help! Oh, I wish I were dead!" There was no hint of tears in the racking sobs, but Sylvia's form relaxed a trifle under her sister's touch and Susanna pursued her advantage.

"It isn't because Lee was unwilling to sell our home, is it, dear? You see we are not sure just what Mr. Acheson's offer may mean. We don't take him entirely in good faith, and that young Easterner whom you know, Mr. Chanler—why, Sylvia!"

For Sylvia had uttered a low cry and thrust her sister from her with unexpected strength.

"Don't speak of him! Don't you dare ever to mention that *beast* to me again!"

She sat up suddenly, brushing the disheveled hair from her eyes with a violent gesture, and Susanna started back at the expression on the distorted face. Chanler? He had ridden with Sylvia almost daily, had taken her to the dance on Saturday night and Lee said that the little sister had been brooding ever since. In all her outbursts of anger Sylvia had never called anyone a "beast" before, nor had that look ever been upon her face. And Chanler had gone away! What had been said on that last ride together?

Seizing the younger girl by her shoulders, Susanna turned her until the moonlight streamed full upon her face.

"Sylvia, look at me! Why do you speak of Mr. Chanler in that way? How has he offended you? I want to know the truth!"

" 'Offended me!' " Sylvia's tone trembled with pent-up rage and mortification. "I—you haven't the right to ask me! No one has the right! Isn't it enough that I have got to think of it, to remember all the rest of my life? Oh, if I could only die! I never—I didn't know——!"

" 'Didn't know'——?" There was an ominous

quiet in the older girl's voice, the portent of which was lost upon Sylvia in her hysterical wrath and shame. "Didn't know what? You have gone too far now not to tell me everything, and I have the right to know! We are of one blood!"

"That is all the more reason! To think that I, a Poindexter——! But the only boys I have ever known were those around here, so how could I tell? I believed—I thought he meant——! Oh, why didn't I die before he ever came! I hate him! I hate him! If I were a man I would kill him if I had to follow him to the ends of the earth!"

She wrenched herself free from her sister's grasp, burying her face in the pillow once more, and this time the tears came in an overwhelming flood at the memory of that moment of bitter humiliation, the first she had ever known, when Garry Chanler had refused her lips.

The fact that mingling with the anger and hot resentment that had smoldered within her for two days there was a searing fire of self-scorn, only fanned the flame of her loathing against the man who had humbled her, and she spoke impulsively without thinking what construction might be placed upon her vindictive, frenzied words. They were a mere exaggeration, anyway, a little white lie which soothed her wounded pride and self-esteem.

Susanna stood as though turned to stone, gazing down upon the trembling, weeping form and within her a mighty purpose formed. A Poindexter had been wronged and a Poindexter alone should exact what tardy reparation were possible for such harm! Lee was the man of the family, but he lay grievously injured, with many weeks of convalescence before him, and Sylvia was still in years a mere child. Susanna alone remained to see that the honor of their name should be upheld and maintained, and at the realization she straightened beneath the crushing blow as though the accolade had fallen upon her shoulders.

Garrison Chanler should make the only amends which lay in his power! He should return to kneel in supplication at the feet of the child whom he had thought to amuse himself with merely for an hour! All thought of the enemy lurking in ambush to plunder and kill was swept from Susanna's mind as completely as was the problem of the fateful thirty days before them. Though this cur went indeed to the ends of the earth, she would follow! He might be rich, influential, clever; she would match her wits against his—her wits, and if necessary the sureness of her aim. Whatever the difficulty, whatever the cost, Susanna would get her man!

CHAPTER IX

CONSEQUENCES

THE sun was high when Sylvia awoke the next morning and she lay for awhile drowsily going over in her mind the conversation of a few hours before with her sister. It had been stupid of her to break down like that and bring Sue to her door; more stupid still to admit that she had been crying about any man! Garry Chanler had been insufferable, but he was gone for good, and if she were to rid herself of that scathing sense of humiliation and shame she must just stop remembering that such an odious creature existed!

She started to rise, but paused with one pink foot extended, as a little disquieting thought came to her. Sue was so serious! Had she inferred more from that outburst against Garry Chanler than Sylvia herself had intended? Of course, he hadn't actually insulted her, even though he had taken it upon himself to make her feel bold and cheap! Her cheeks burned again at the very thought of that hideous moment, and although she hated him none the less for his attitude, she was

forced to acknowledge in her inmost heart that she had brought it upon herself.

But what if he should not have gone for good, after all! If he should return and Sue encountered him, there might be embarrassing consequences. After holding up the Achesons in that high-handed fashion there was nothing she might not be capable of saying or doing!

But it was a far cry from New York to the Circle Six, and for the first time Sylvia thought with thankfulness of the vast distance between. Sheer accident had brought Garry Chanler to Dexter in the first place and nothing could be more unlikely than that he should ever return. The broad sunlight streaming in at the window upon appointments familiar since her childhood, the echo of Tad Mason's exuberant "whoopee" from the corral, the rattle of Wun See's pots and pans in the cook house, all the customary trivial sights and sounds of early morning, made the scene of the previous evening seem like a silly dream, and as she dressed Sylvia laughed at her fears of a few moments before. Garrison Chanler didn't matter any more, his path would never cross theirs again and everything was just as it was before he came.

Humming blithely she was turning away from her dresser when the corner of a folded square of paper protruding from beneath the fat little pin-

cushion caught her eye and the humming ceased abruptly as she drew it forth with a puzzled frown. Her name was written upon it in Susanna's firm hand and her own fingers trembled as she unfolded it.

"Dear Sylvia" [she read], "I am going away on important business. Don't worry if you do not hear from me for a week or two. Take good care of Lee and obey the instructions I have left for you with Wes. All my love. SUSANNA."

Gone away! What "important business" could have come up so suddenly? Why had Sue not mentioned it on the previous night? She must have slipped into the room while Sylvia slept and tucked the note beneath the cushion. But why had she not awakened her and told her instead?

A score of questions thronged in Sylvia's mind as she flew with lightning feet down the gallery to her sister's room. The door was ajar and one glance within made the girl catch her breath sharply, for it was empty, the bed had not been disturbed and there were evidences everywhere of hurried repacking.

Impulsively Sylvia started for Lee's room, but a second thought made her pause and then return slowly to her own, where she plumped down upon

the side of the bed with one foot tucked under her and smoothed the little note out on her knee.

Where could Sue have gone? Since her return from school in Kansas City she had been no further from the ranch than to the nearby county-seat, and then only for a few days' stay. What business connected with the ranch could keep her away for a week or two, and why had she gone so secretly?

The note, too, mere scrap though it was, seemed unlike Sue. She was not demonstrative except on rare occasions, and there was something strained and formal about "all my love. Susanna." As Sylvia read and reread it, the injunction which in her first surprise had escaped her notice was borne in upon her and she crumpled the paper in her hands. What "instructions" had Sue left for her with the foreman? Why would they all still persist in treating her as though she were a child! Wes must know where Sue had gone and why, and she determined to seek him out without further delay.

But no one was near the corral or outbuildings save Tad, and he informed her that the foreman had ridden out to a far section of the ranch and would not return before nightfall, so she retraced her steps to the house and sat down to a solitary breakfast for which she had no appetite. She had

forborn to ask Tad about her sister's unexpected departure and his frank, cheery manner had betrayed nothing unusual, but as she drank her coffee Sylvia forced herself to face a preposterous idea which had been in the back of her mind since she first read the note.

Could Sue have actually placed a literal construction upon her charge against Garry Chanler and followed him to compel an apology? It seemed ridiculous, beyond the wildest possibility, and yet Sue had inherited their father's fiery Southern pride in a more marked degree even than Lee, and would go to any extreme length to avenge a personal affront. What if she should overtake Garry and learn from him the true version of what had really occurred!

Sylvia pushed aside her almost untasted breakfast and went out to pace up and down upon the porch, striving to recall every detail of the previous night's conversation. She remembered that Sue had been very quiet—strangely quiet, it seemed now!—after her outburst against Garry. She had soothed her and bathed her face and put her to bed, but had made no direct comment on the situation, and her final "good-night" had been said in an almost absent-minded way. Of course, she might have been troubled about something else, something connected with the financial management of the ranch and perhaps making up her

mind to take this trip; it might be that she had not even comprehended the import of Sylvia's words and gathered only that there had been some sort of misunderstanding with the Easterner before his departure. Sylvia grasped eagerly at the comfort of this thought, but the doubt remained, and at last she turned and went in to her brother's room.

"Hello!" Lee greeted her from the pillows. "Don't I get any breakfast around here? I've been ringing and ringing, and I know that slant-eyed Chink isn't half as deaf as he pretends to be You wait till I'm on my feet again!"

"I'll get your breakfast in a minute, Lee." Sylvia straightened the bedclothes and brought him a bowl of fresh water. "Do you know that Sue has gone away again?"

She had not meant to ask a direct question, but it passed her lips almost inadvertently and Lee nodded vigorously as he reached for the towel in her hand.

"Yes, she woke me at sun-up and said she wasn't satisfied with the way things had gone in Mammon City after she had had time to think it over, and had decided to go back; she may even have to make a trip to Dallas—Ouch! Soap in my eye!"

His further remarks were muffled in the towel

and Sylvia waited until he emerged before demanding anxiously:

"You're sure that is why she's gone, Lee? It isn't just an excuse?"

"What in the world——!" Lee stared. "Where else would she go, and why?"

"Well, she never tells *me* anything!" Sylvia temporized in an injured tone, but her spirits lifted once more. If it was only that tiresome legal business about the ranch——! "I don't see why you let her run everything, Lee!"

"I don't mean to, after this, for her own sake!" Lee retorted. "She's the oldest, and took hold right after father's death, while I have had my hands full here, you know, ever since I left college, but it is a shame that she should have a man's work thrust upon her shoulders! She's only twenty-five right now, remember, and lots of girls have nothing in their empty heads at that age except dancing and flirting!"

Sylvia blushed scarlet.

"If that is a hit at me——" She paused with the wash-basin in her hands and spoke with dignity. "I *don't* flirt, and it is only natural to like to dance! If you want us both to be old maids on your hands——!"

"Sue will never be that!" Lee sat up suddenly. "When do I get some grub?"

Her brother's wants attended to, Sylvia interviewed Wun See and set the house to rights, then wandered restlessly out to the corral, but it was deserted even by Tad. Moonlady whinnied softly and trotted up to put her velvety nose between the rails, but among the other horses there was no sign of her own pet broncho and Sylvia's lips set resentfully. Wes wouldn't have thought of turning Moonlady out without directions from Sue, and he had no right to be so high-handed with her! Had he taken it for granted that she would not ride that day just because that horrid Chanler person had gone?

She turned away and started for the house when a woman rode in at the gate and straight up to her; a magnificent figure of a woman, too full-blown perhaps, but with boldly handsome features and the clear olive skin and dark, flashing eyes of the country below the border.

The del Rio woman, sweetheart of Jake Brower's henchman! What could she want here? Sylvia drew herself up slightly, but before she could speak the other murmured in soft, liquid tones:

"Pardon, Señorita. Your sister, she ees here?"

"Not now. Did you wish to see her?" Sylvia kept her own tones studiously polite. Nothing was

to be gained by ordering the woman off the ranch, and such a course would only make an open enemy of her.

"Eet ees a message that I have for her." Rosa del Rio hesitated. "She weel return this night, no?"

"I do not think so, but I can take any message you have brought."

"No!" The woman drew herself up in her high saddle. "Eet ees alone to her that I can speak. You weel say to her when she come, please, that Rosa del Rio have the message for her, but there ees risk? I weel send the little Rafael to find when the Señorita shall return."

The woman had glanced furtively back at the deserted road and Sylvia asked quickly:

"Is it about—about my brother? I don't know when my sister will return, but it may not be for some days. If it is important, if you have come as a friend——?"

"A friend? Yes!" the woman interrupted eagerly. Then her face darkened and she shook her head. "The message I can tell only to the seester and that eef no other knows that I have been here, but the little Rafael, he shall come. Adios, Señorita!"

She nodded gravely, wheeled her pinto and urged it at a dead run for the gate and Sylvia stood

gazing after her in bewilderment. Should she tell Lee—or Wes—of this unexpected visitor? The woman had forbidden it, but she had come in broad daylight and taken the chance that the foreman or some of the punchers might be about the corral. Rosa del Rio belonged to the element with which the girls of the Circle Six did not come in contact and Sylvia had never exchanged a word with her before. What could she have wanted? Had she indeed a message for Sue from someone?

Sylvia was still pondering when she heard a familiar step behind her and she turned to face Wes.

"Mornin', Miss Sylvie." He smiled and the fine wrinkles deepened about his kindly eyes. "You been lookin' for that pinto of your'n? He seemed to be favorin' his shoulder again and I knew you'd want him rested up—Was that del Rio girl lookin' for me?"

He asked the question blandly, but Sylvia snapped:

"No! Were you expecting her?"

"I shore wasn't!" Wes returned with emphasis. "You oughtn't to have talked to her. Miss Sylvie; if I'd come in time, I'd ha' run her off the ranch."

"I'll talk to whom I please!" Sylvia drew herself up to all her slim height. "It's about time people realized that I'm not a child any longer!"

The foreman gazed at her with an expression of hurt bewilderment, as though she had struck him.

"Miss Sylvie! It's just because I've watched you grow up since you wasn't knee-high to a coyote that I'm tellin' you!" he protested earnestly. "That del Rio girl ain't fitten to speak to you and she's got no business on the Circle Six. I don't guess you savvy, but she's plumb friendly with some of Jake Brower's outfit—or was— and her comin' here means trouble. What did she claim to want?"

"I don't know!" In sheer contrariness Sylvia resolved to keep the woman's confidence. "I couldn't understand her well enough to find out, and she turned suddenly and rode off; she must have seen you coming. Who is 'the little Rafael'?"

"Kid that lives in her shack, 'bout six-seven year old; brother, I guess." Wes eyed her keenly. "What'd Rosa say 'bout the little cuss-feller?"

"Something about his coming here, but I couldn't make it out."

" 'Comin' here'!" Wes repeated. "You couldn't have got that straight, Miss Sylvie; the kid cain't ride yet, and he shore couldn't hoof it all them miles! If Rosa comes again and you see her, just you call me. I'm dead certain that Miss Susanna wouldn't like for you to——"

"I don't care whether she would or not!" Sylvia

interrupted, adding quickly: "Wes, what do you know about Sue going away again so soon? She never said a word about it to me last night, but she told Lee this morning that she might have to go to Dallas."

"Reckon that's correct." Wes was gazing out along the road which Rosa del Rio had taken. "Miss Susanna's got a powerful heap to do roundin' up the business of the ranch."

There was a note of reserve in his voice which the girl's quick ear caught.

"You knew she was going!" she accused.

"Not till she come out to the bunkhouse all fixed up to go to the train," replied Wes patiently. "That was just 'bout light this mornin'. There's somethin' that's got to be 'tended to afore a partic'lar time and I cal'clate that's what took Miss Susanna away. Link driv' her down to the deepo. Reckon she kind of made up her mind over night."

The foreman's matter-of-fact tones had allayed the last lingering doubt in Sylvia's mind as to the motive for her sister's sudden journey, but she bethought herself of the injunction in the note.

"Sue said she had left some in—some message for me with you. What is it, Wes?" she demanded.

He looked uncomfortable.

"You ain't goin' to take it right kindly, but Miss Sue don't want for you to go offen the ranch by

yourself while she's away.—It's on account of Jake's outfit," he added hurriedly. "They tried to git Lee and there ain't no tellin' where they'll stop afore Big Matt rounds 'em up. One of the boys kin ride in to Dexter with you when you want to go——"

"I don't want them!" Sylvia cried furiously. "It's bad enough to have to live here without being kept prisoner! I shall ride where I please! —So that was why you took my pinto out of the corral, was it? I—oh, if Lee didn't need me I'd show you all!"

She turned abruptly and started for the house, leaving Wes to stare after her, open-mouthed. How perfectly horrid of Sue! It was just another excuse to try to exercise authority over her, for she couldn't be in any danger from Jake or his outfit. His quarrel was with Lee alone. She was glad that she hadn't given Wes the satisfaction of knowing Rosa del Rio's message; glad that she had given him something to think about. Could she have looked ahead and known the ultimate cost of her silence Sylvia would have flown back to him on winged feet, but instead she went into the house and closed the door.

CHAPTER X

FROM THE CLOUDS

THE huge train shed roared with a score of engines and screeched with a thousand wheels, and a veritable sea of people surged like stampeded cattle about the vast rotunda of the terminal station. Red-capped porters shouldered their way through the throng and the stentorian tones of the train announcers bellowed above the multitudinous hum of voices and the shuffle and clatter of innumerable feet on marble floor.

The girl in the plain blue traveling suit with masses of rippling brown hair showing beneath her small hat, who had worked her way to the edge of the incoming crowd from a late train, halted in the first cleared space and placing her huge, shabby bag at her feet stood for a moment watching the hurrying mob with amazed but not dismayed eyes. New York!

All these people could not live here, of course. They were just passing through, travelers like herself. During the hot, tedious days of her journey, Susanna had stifled an occasional qualm within her by the reflection that the Empire City

was only a bigger Dexter after all; bigger even than Kansas City, but with its grades of society as definitely accentuated as in a cattle town. What did the immensity and strangeness of the metropolis matter to her? She had her mission to accomplish, a wrong to right and mere surroundings were of little moment.

She would find Garrison Chanler, compel him to return with her and offer to Sylvia a name to replace the one he had regarded so lightly. If he did not——? Unconsciously she squared her shoulders and the small, firmly-molded chin lifted. She had crossed more than half a continent to get her man, and she would not return until her purpose was accomplished.

Picking up her bag once more she dived into the throng converging densely like scurrying mice at the gate, to be arrested by an obsequious voice at her side.

"Carry yo' bag, miss?"

Thankfully she relinquished it to the porter.

"Is there a hotel near?"

"Yas'm, just oveh the street." His round eyes glanced in quick appraisal over her simple attire. "Hit's er monst'ous big hotel, but hit's boun' ter be full 'ceptin' de mostest 'spensive 'suites. eve'ythin's scandalous high in dis man's town, though!"

Susanna admitted the truth of this to herself somewhat ruefully a few minutes later when she had registered and followed a resplendently uniformed bellboy from the glittering lobby to an elevator. The huge caravansary was more gorgeous than any palace of her imagining, but her purse was slender and if Chanler were not at his apartments she must locate him quickly, no matter by what means. To wire home for more funds would be unthinkable; no one must know she had been in New York until her return with the despicable object of her quest.

A sudden thought made her smile a trifle grimly to herself as after a simple meal in her room she set about her preparation for bed. Unless she heard his name she would not know Chanler if he stood before her, for she had never even seen his face! He was comparatively young and must be suave of manner and good-looking, after a dashing, insolent, perhaps even dissipated fashion, to have impressed a mere unsophisticated child. He rode and danced and dressed well according to Eastern ideas, as must some thousands of other young men in the city and Susanna strove to recall a single distinctive comment upon him which might serve to set him apart from the general run. She had heard him mentioned only in a casual way by her brother and the punchers on the ranch when

they were speculating as to his presence in Dexter.

Had he seen her, though? If, guessing her errand, he were coward enough to refuse to receive her and she were compelled to force herself upon him by strategy, would he try to evade her before she could state her purpose? If so, she had but one recourse, and in anticipation she did not falter. One way or the other, Garrison Chanler should pay!

The sunlight streaming in at the window awakened her the next morning and for a minute Susanna lay staring in bewildered fashion at the strange, ornate room and listening to the subdued roar of traffic which rose wave on wave in an ever-flowing tide of sound from the street far below. Where on earth was she and what was going on? She missed the motion of the train to which the three previous days had made her accustomed, and there was something hushed and expectant in the quietude immediately about her in contrast to that muffled, multisonous rumble and clangor from without.

Then full consciousness brought a flash of remembrance and she sprang from her bed and rang the bell. She had reached her journey's end and her self-appointed mission awaited her. She had no intention of warning Garrison Chanler of her coming by note or telephone call, and although

it was still early she meant to breakfast and then present herself at the address which her brother had mentioned, the Blandford Apartments.

Susanna procured the address on upper Fifth Avenue from the telephone book and prepared to put her plan into immediate execution, giving no thought to the fact that the visit of a young woman unattended to a bachelor apartment on the city's most aristocratic thoroughfare in the broad sunlight of early morning would be apt to place her in a most unenviable position. Her intention, from the moment when her resolve was taken, had had the directness of utter simplicity, and it did not occur to her now to deviate from it; to find Garrison Chanler, to confront him, no matter what the attendant circumstances, and exact reparation for the wrong he had done, even as her brother or father—had the latter been still living—would have exacted it. Neither was there a hint of melodrama in the business-like air with which she drew from her bag a small revolver, loaded it and slipped it into the soft voluminous folds of her silk girdle. No dread of the legal inhibitions of an effete eastern civilization deterred her; there was one law, east and west, for the despoiler of womanhood and that lay ready to her hand.

The Blandford proved to be further uptown

than she had supposed, and removed from the stately ranks of palatial residences of white stone and marble. It was an old-fashioned private dwelling, which had evidently been recently converted into apartments and boasted an elderly dignified attendant at the switchboard and another in charge of the elevator.

The former regarded her in well-bred but undisguised astonishment as Susanna presented herself before him and asked for Mr. Garrison Chanler.

"Mr. Chanler, miss?" he repeated, as though he could scarcely believe his ears. "I really couldn't say, miss! What name, please?"

"Just say that a lady would like to speak to him on important business; the name doesn't matter." Susanna replied more brusquely than was her wont, conscious that she was flushing beneath the old man's respectful but obviously scandalized scrutiny. Was she a coward that mere convention should stand in her way now?

"I doubt if Mr. Chanler is here, miss." The attendant spoke doubtfully and turned to the switchboard, but, just as he plugged in, a man of middle age came down the staircase at the other side of the elevator cage. He was attired in the sober black of a valet and carried two heavy bags. "Excuse me, but were you asking for Mr. Chanler?" he asked. "He's out of town, miss, for the

week-end; down at the Sandy Cove Country Club. Will you leave any message?''

''No, I—it doesn't matter,'' she stammered. ''I had a personal message for him, but I can deliver it another time.''

''Very good, miss.''

He bowed slightly and marched out with his bags, and only when she, too, had taken her departure and saw him disappearing into a taxi did she realize that she had not the remotest idea where the Sandy Cove Country Club was.

The clerk at her hotel, however, supplied the information that it was out on Long Island, adding data as to trains, and Susanna decided to go there at once, although after her recent experience she realized that to present herself unsponsored before a score of feminine eyes as coldly appraising as were those of Daisy Acheson would be more of an ordeal than she had contemplated. No excuse that she might offer for her intrusion occurred to her as she set forth, but her purpose remained unchanged; she had come east to get her man, and no mere social law, written or unwritten, should stand in her path.

The train was stifling, but a run of a trifle more than an hour brought her to a quaint little village set in a level plain of fertile farm-lands, with the blue waters of the bay dancing in the sunlight

beyond. A row of smart-looking station cars and spick-and-span taxis were drawn up beside the platform, and selecting one of the latter Susanna was whirled down the maple-shaded street and out upon a broad road flanked by stately villas. Despite their velvety lawns and well-spaced vistas of landscape gardening they appeared to her western eyes to be huddled and cramped within the confines of their smugly trimmed hedges and a swift longing came upon her for the vast reaches of the cow country, mile on mile, with only the glistening ribbon of wire to mark the boundaries and a clean sweep of wind which brought no acrid smoke of cities, nor tang of the sea.

The small, pretentious estates gave way at length to comparatively open country, with only an occasional farmhouse and broad fields interspersed with clumps of woodland, and Susanna began to wonder how far the club lay from the station, when all at once she became conscious of a muffled whirring overhead, which increased to a droning roar and an airplane appeared, riding as gracefully as a buzzard on the wing. Aircraft were not common sights in the cow country and the girl watched with interest as the machine banked low and turned in a wide sweep to rise again like some sentient thing.

All at once the steady drone changed to a suc-

cession of sharp reports with breathless seconds between, and the plane lurched queerly, banking again—this time at what seemed like a perilous angle—then righting itself as if by a conscious effort.

Could the flyer be trying out some of the daredevil stunts of which she had heard? Susanna stood up the better to see and was unaware that her taxi had stopped and the driver, too, was gazing aloft, for the plane was almost directly overhead now, and it became apparent even to her inexperienced eyes that something was indeed desperately wrong.

Struggling as though seeking liberation from invisible cords which drew it earthward the plane made a last futile effort to rise to a safer level, but its engine was silenced and after hanging for one hideous moment of suspense it fell nose on to the ground.

Spellbound, Susanna had watched the losing fight with every nerve tense, but scarcely had the crash of impact reverberated in her ears than she had torn open the door of the taxi and was speeding over the meadow to the twisted wreck from which dense clouds of smoke arose to mingle with the dust cloud. Her driver had followed, and just as a tiny red ribbon of flame curled from the tangled mass of steel and canvas he seized her arm.

"Plane's afire!" he gasped. "See it? You can't do nothin'——!"

"The man—the man in there!" Susanna wrenched herself free and plunged forward. "We've got to pull him out——!"

"He's strapped in! You'd be burnt alive!" the fellow sniveled. "Like as not he's dead, anyway, after that fall! Keep away——!"

But Susanna had scarcely heard. She gave him one withering backward glance, then dived straight into the smoke which billowed in ever increasing volume from the distorted heap. A stinging pain seared her eyes and invisible bands seemed tightening across her breast, but she flung herself upon the wreckage, rending and clawing at the débris with frantic haste while the ominous crackle grew louder and a treacherous, fiery tongue lapped ever more near.

Each laboring breath came now with a stab of agony and red hot gimlets were boring into her eyes, but she was only subconsciously aware of it, for beneath the shattered section of framework, which by a mighty effort she had pulled aside, a set, colorless face appeared.

Although there was no sign of life, Susanna worked with a surge of almost superhuman strength, uncovering the limp, crumpled body and tearing at the strap which bound it to the wreck

of the seat with bleeding fingers. After what seemed an interminable time the buckles gave way and she slipped her arm beneath the sagging shoulders, just as her taxi driver, overcoming his craven fear, scrambled up beside her. Together they dragged the body clear and carried it out of the range of smoke, to lower it gently to the ground.

A huge touring car had driven up at breakneck speed and three men piled out of it shouting inarticulately as they rushed forward. The taxi driver ran toward them, but Susanna dropped on her knees by the body. Did she dream it, or had the pale lips quivered ever so slightly? She tore the leather jacket apart and pressed her ear against his breast and her own senses thrilled as a faint fluttering rewarded her. She raised her head and found that a pair of gray eyes, bewildered, but surprisingly steady, had opened and were gazing straight up into her own.

"Snipes!" a hoarse voice cried at her side. "Snipes, old man!"

" 'Lo." It was a mere breath which issued from the prostrate man's lips, and with it his eyes dulled and closed, and Susanna rose and backed away as the newcomer took her place. He was an exceedingly stout young man with curly, tow-colored hair and an upturned nose that would have

seemed comical were it not for the woe which puckered his countenance.

"Snipes, speak to me!" he implored. "Craigie! Bim! Somebody get some water! I knew the old bus would stall, damn it, but he wouldn't listen!—Snipes, you're not done for!"

"Stop yapping, Pete, and get some of this down his throat!" The second and third men had come up, and the foremost held out a flask. "It will take more than that to send old Snipes west!—There, he'll come around in a minute!"

"There's a doctor just down the road." The third man, older and more self-contained than the others, spoke with a note of authority. "We'll get him to the car——!"

"Hey, where's the girl?" The stout young man called "Pete" stared about in amazement. "Didn't you see her? Regular Amazon, and brown as a berry, but a stunner! She must have helped that fellow, whoever he was, to dig Snipes out of the wreck!"

"There was a taxi standing in the road as we drove up——:" The second man turned. "Why, it's gone!"

Save for their own car the road was deserted, for taxi and girl had vanished.

CHAPTER XI

IN HER HANDS

HOW she made her way back to the city to her hotel Susanna could not afterward remember nor did she dimly realize, until the mirror in her own room gave back her reflection, what a sensation she must have created in the lobby and elevator. Torn and draggled, weary and smoke-begrimed, with brows and lashes singed and her hands mangled, she was indeed a sorry spectacle but she wasted little thought upon herself.

Had the young aviator been fatally hurt? It must have seemed despicable of her to run away as she had done, but she dreaded notoriety above all things, with the imperative need before her of keeping herself as inconspicuous as possible until her mission was accomplished. As soon as the injured man was freed from the wrecked plane and in the hands of his friends it had been her first instinct to flee and she had peremptorily ordered the taxi driver to take her away from the scene. But somehow she could not put from her thoughts that moment when she had raised her head from

the breast of the fallen airman and met the unexpected gaze of those gray eyes. Candid, straightforward eyes they were, and the mouth had looked firm, with an upward, humorous quirk at the corners, even though it was drawn with pain.

It could not be that he would die! His body had been limp when she dragged it from the wreckage but not twisted with the grim grotesquerie which would tell of shattered limbs, and Susanna recalled reading of instances when aviators fell from almost incredible heights to escape unscathed as by a miracle. It might be that save for a bad shaking up he was little the worse for the accident.

If she could only know! It was natural, she told herself, that having been instrumental in his rescue she should feel interested in the young man's recovery, and those tense moments when she had raced with the smoke and darting flame to liberate him had given her a real personal concern as though he had been one of her own boys of the Circle Six. Almost defensively she dwelt upon this thought.

Would an account of the accident appear in the newspapers on the morrow? Would she ever learn whether he had survived or not? For the first time since the start of her journey her mind

was far afield from her mission. What ridiculous name was it that the young man's friends had called him?—Oh, yes, "Snipes"! He had seemed to hear and understand even though he had drifted off into unconsciousness again just as she slipped away. If she had only waited to hear where they were taking him she might have managed to find out indirectly how his condition was progressing. He must never know, of course, who the strange girl was who had rescued him! It was a blessing that his eyes had rested on hers only for a moment and that when his brain was yet clouded from the shock of his fall! if by some miracle of coincidence they were ever to come face to face it was a comfort to contemplate, at least, that he would not recognize her.

It was too late then to return to Long Island and journey to the country club and she felt too shaken, even had she been able so quickly to rehabilitate her appearance, to face Chanler and force the issue. Far better to wait until his return to town on Monday and then win her way by some strategy into his presence, for the elderly Cerberus and the valet would both prove obstacles, but when once she and Garrison Chanler faced each other she had no doubt as to the outcome.

Sunday was a long-drawn-out tedium of sus-

pense, unrelieved even by any reassurance as to the victim of the previous day's accident, for although she scanned each page of every newspaper obtainable from the stalls no mention was made of the fallen plane. In vain she assured herself over and over that it was no concern of hers; airmen were injured or killed every day, and a sterner duty awaited her than mere idle speculation as to the fate of this one.

Almost as soon as the shops opened on the following morning she was abroad to replace the hopelessly ruined attire which she had worn on the previous Saturday. The sullen heat of midsummer beat down upon the city with a stifling humidity as the day advanced, and left Susanna, at the end of her shopping tour, breathless and gasping but consumed with impatience for the coming of the hour which she had decided upon for her momentous interview with Chanler. By afternoon a mass of purple clouds banked heavily up in the western sky and a hot wind, precursor of the coming storm, swirled suddenly through the streets. The girl's restlessness grew, but she forced herself to dress with deliberation and her hands did not tremble as once more she tucked the small revolver into her girdle.

Five strokes sounded from the clock in the lobby and the first drops of rain fell in an angry

spatter as she left the hotel and entered a taxi. She had still no definite plan for obtaining ingress to Chanler's apartment, but fortune favored her, for the seat before the switchboard was vacant when she reached the Blandford and the diminishing whirr of the elevator announced its ascent. A handful of letters awaited sorting in a shallow tray upon the table in the center of the foyer and Susanna's glance falling upon them she descried that the topmost bore in a large feminine scrawl the inscription:—"Mr. H. Garrison Chanler, Apartment 2-A, The Blandford."

Waiting to read no more, the girl turned and darted swiftly up the stairs. If the apartments were numbered after the fashion of those in which she had visited school friends in Kansas City, "2-A" must be the second floor front, and she hastened around the first landing and into the turn of the second flight of stairs before the now descending car should disclose her presence.

When it had safely passed to the main floor Susanna sped up to the second landing and along the hall to the door of the apartment which she knew must look out upon the Avenue. No bell was in evidence but a huge knocker of antique bronze had been placed between the two upper panels and her hand was lifted to it when she paused.

A voice which, although no longer raised in anguished accents, was unmistakably familiar to her ears, had sounded from the other side of the door.

"All right now, Snipes? Confound that man of yours! I wish he'd come!"

"Snipes!" For an instant Susanna's senses reeled, then she pulled herself together sternly. Of course she had not heard aright!

There followed an indistinguishable murmur in a deeper masculine tone and then the first voice once more, nearer this time.

"Tommyrot! I told you that plane would be the death of you! No man could crash as you did on Saturday and get off with a mere strain! I hate like the devil to leave you, but I've got to toddle along to motor out to that infernal dinner. See you later at the club, if you feel up to it."

Footsteps sounded down the inner hall and Susanna had only time to slip up the stairs and conceal herself around the first turning when the door opened. Peering cautiously from behind the corner of the screening elevator shaft she beheld the stout, curly-haired young man with the absurdly tip-tilted nose who had been the first of the belated trio in the huge motorcar to arrive upon the scene of the rescue two days before on that never-to-be-forgotten moment. He paused for a final word to someone within; then the door

closed and he advanced and rang the elevator bell.

Susanna stood motionless while the car ascended, received its burden and started downward once more. She could not doubt the evidence of her eyes and ears! That must be the right apartment, for the number had been plainly lettered above the knocker; she had recognized the departing visitor and he had been obviously addressing his host when he spoke of the "crash on Saturday" and called him by the same name he had used then. The man she had saved was Garrison Chanler!

It could not be! A revulsion of feeling such as she had never known swept over her, leaving her cold and trembling so that she could scarcely stand. She did not stop to ask herself why she was so fiercely loath to accept the fact that the aviator was the man she had come so far to seek, nor why she so instinctively combated the truth now.

Out of the chaos of her thoughts the event of two days before flashed once more in detail across her mental vision and she found one point upon which to congratulate herself. If the almost unbelievable were true, it was fortunate that in the brief moment when their eyes met the half-stunned man had been still lingering on the borderland of unconsciousness and could have no

memory of her presence, much less her appearance. His friends had arrived in time to witness the rescue, but if later they had told him of it he would have no reason when she confronted him to connect her with the mysterious girl who had taken part in it, and she promised herself savagely that he never should know! He would never be under other obligation to her or hers than that in which his own vile conduct had placed him!

No wonder little Sylvia had been deceived in this Chanler, if he had exerted himself to impress her, when his very appearance had prejudiced Susanna herself in his favor to such an extent as to make her stand aghast at plain facts! Lee had liked him, too, and Wes, and, although the rest of the boys habitually looked a trifle askance at a stranger who offered no account of himself, none of them had had a word to say against him. His duplicity must have been well masked, but her eyes were opened and she knew him for what he was! He should find that he had no simple, unsophisticated girl to deal with, but a woman, a Poindexter, bent upon avenging a stain upon an honored and cherished name!

Yet he had looked so boyish and helpless lying there, almost like Lee himself after Jake Brower's bullets had done their work! There had been the

bewildered appeal of a hurt child in his half-conscious gaze! Angrily and in scathing self-contempt she forced the vision from her. Any man, no matter how low and despicable his character, would evoke pity in his extremity if one were not aware of his identity, and even had Susanna known she would have gone to his rescue in the name of common humanity. But there would be no weakness in her attitude toward him now. Sylvia's tear-stained little face, blurred in a shimmer of moonlight, arose suddenly before her and she vowed anew that for every tear, for every moment of corroding shame and bitter mental agony, he should pay a hundredfold!

How long she had crouched there in the numbing shock of her discovery, Susanna did not know, but at last she crept down from her hiding-place to the door which had closed so short a time before and, without giving herself time to think, she resolutely sounded the knocker.

Again there came the tread of footsteps, but slower and a trifle dragging, and as the door swung inward Susanna unconsciously squared her shoulders and drew a deep breath. Then she looked upward, above the level of her own eyes, into a pair of steady, clear gray ones which she remembered. They were no longer bewildered

with the haze of half-awakened consciousness, but frankly surprised at the vision of the strange young woman which confronted him.

"I am afraid—" he began, but Susanna silenced him.

"Mr. Chanler, I have something to say to you. May I come in for a moment, if you please?"

With instinctive courtesy he stepped aside.

"Certainly. You know my name, but I must confess——!"

Susanna advanced just within the door, leaving space enough to close it behind her, and then stood with her back against it while one hand slipped to her girdle.

"I will explain." She could not help noting even in the tenseness of the moment that he was pale and hollow-eyed and a twinge as of pain passed across his face as he moved, but she steeled herself to her purpose. "You have lately been in Texas?"

"I have. I returned only a few days ago." Blank amazement had spread across his features, but he replied readily enough.

"You have been stopping at a small cattle town called 'Dexter.' You know the Circle Six ranch!" It was no longer a question, but an accusation, which she hurled at him, with gathering intensity

in her tone, and in contrast his became quieter and more self-contained but his eyes never left her face.

"I have been in Dexter. I know the ranch to which you refer."

"I want you to come back with me." Deadly earnestness rang in her voice.

"'Back'?— To Texas?" he exclaimed in astonishment. "My dear young lady——!"

"You know Miss Sylvia Poindexter?" Susanna uttered the name very low, but distinctly, and the man before her drew himself up.

"Most certainly. But may I ask who you are, why you are here and why Miss Poindexter is brought into this very extraordinary conversation?"

"It is to remind you of her that I am here. Her father is dead, her brother lying injured and helpless, and you thought her quite without protection——!"

"Ah!" There was a world of horrified comprehension in the monosyllable, but no suspicion of confusion or guilt as Garry Chanler went on rapidly. "Surely you cannot mean——!"

"I mean this! Denials and lying evasions will avail you nothing! As soon as you are well enough you will return with me to the Circle Six and there you shall make the only reparation

possible for such an act as yours. You cannot escape the consequences!" Susanna's hand moved ever so slightly and the burnished nose of her revolver glinted upward from her hip. "I need not explain further, I think. I want your word that you will come back as soon as you are able to travel."

"You are Susanna Poindexter." There was a thin white line about his lips and the gray eyes shot fire but he gestured toward her revolver with a slight shrug. "That is entirely unnecessary, let me assure you, and there is no reason for delay. I am well enough to travel and absolutely at your service."

CHAPTER XII

PAROLED IN CUSTODY

THE summer shower had settled into a steady rain and the tall, slightly pale young man waiting patiently in the great station beside one of the gateways which led to the trains shook his head with an air of finality at the appeal of his middle-aged companion.

"No, Frank. I tell you it is impossible for me to take you along. Get back to the rooms as quickly as you can and close the windows; this rain will ruin my books——"

"But, sir, if you'll only listen to me!" the valet pleaded. "You're not fit to travel, indeed you're not! How do we know that something isn't broke inside of you, after all? I've looked out for you, man and boy, for twenty years, and if you must go on this trip without warning I ought to be with you! What if you're took sick in some rough, wild place——?"

"I sha'n't be. I'm expecting a—er—a man here for a final word on a business matter and it's nearly train time." The young man's eyes swept

the hurrying crowd somewhat nervously as he spoke. "Run along home like a good chap, and take care of things until I return."

"And when'll that be, sir?" Frank paused uncertainly, eyeing his employer with anticipatory skepticism.

Garry Chanler shrugged.

"I'll wire you when I can wind up this business. Good-bye, Frank; take care of yourself."

He held out his hand and the valet shook it gloomily.

"I must say I hope you will do the same, but I have my doubts, sir! Good-by."

He turned and elbowed his way through the throng and Garry watched his departure with amused, affectionate eyes. He had tried the faithful soul with many sudden whims and vagaries during the years of his service, but no doubt Frank thought him crazy at last. Garry wondered himself if he were dreaming. Had that amazing scene in his apartment a few hours before been a mere figment of a fevered brain or was he actually on the eve of starting West in the virtual custody of an avenging goddess in the guise of a stunningly attractive girl? Would Pete Bigelow or any of the other fellows believe him if he told them that the sedate portals of the Blandford had been stormed by a young Amazon with

drawn revolver who demanded his return to Dexter to face some mythical charge?

Had it not been for her mention of the Circle Six, and of Sylvia Poindexter, he would have considered the whole affair a silly and ill-timed hoax, but that and her deadly seriousness of manner put a different complexion on the matter.

What on earth had Sylvia accused him of to her sister? He knew that he had left the child in a tempest of wounded vanity and pride, and he regretted the necessity for it; but it had been for her own good and the only way out of an awkward situation which she had brought upon herself. It was never his way to seek excuses for himself, and reviewing his behavior with an open mind, he could not honestly find room for criticism. It had been foolish of him, perhaps, to be nice to the silly, emotional little thing, but he had been sorry for her and sympathized with her discontent at her loneliness and isolation. Hang it all, he had never had the slightest idea of flirting with her! And now his easy good nature had precipitated him into the maddest, most unbelievable sort of adventure with a girl he had never seen before!

But had he? He was certain that if he had encountered her in the roads about Dexter the image of her would have been implanted upon his memory; her splendid, flashing eyes, her perfectly

molded figure, the superb carriage of her head—Jove! He could imagine her on a horse! There was nothing about her to suggest kinship with the delicate blonde prettiness of her sister and yet there had been something vaguely familiar, too.

Would she come or would her courage fail her, after all, at the prospect of the long journey in the company of her prisoner on parole? Garry had given his word of honor to meet her here, but it was past the time appointed and he shifted a trifle wearily from one foot to the other as the throbbing in his strained back muscles changed to a dull ache.

He would not give up the adventure for worlds, however! At first he had been stunned by her implied accusation and speechless with resentment and wrath at its injustice; but his sense of humor had come to his aid and philosophically he had decided to see the thing through. Explanation or denial would alike be futile now, and the ridiculous misunderstanding, distasteful as it was, would be quickly straightened out at the journey's end. Meanwhile, Susanna's pluck and indomitable spirit interested him. No wonder she had been more than a match for the Achesons when she held them up and commandeered their car! He remembered her sobriquet, "Two-gun

Sue,'' and chuckled to himself despite his pain. If she came, the next few days promised to hold a unique experience.

Then all at once he caught sight of her shouldering her way through the crowd toward him, and he straightened. She was game, after all! She walked with a long, swinging stride, which made the people about her seem to be scurrying ignobly, and her small head appeared to tower above theirs. Her natural dignity was almost queenly in comparison with the stilted hauteur of the girls of his own acquaintance, and the admiration in his eyes as she approached was as obvious as it was unstudied.

''I am late.'' She nodded coolly as she spoke and her matter-of-fact tone held no shade of expression beyond a brisk, impersonal civility. ''Our reservations are made, however, and we will go straight through—Oh!''

''What is it?'' he asked quickly, for there had been unmistakable consternation in the sudden exclamation.

''My handbag! I must have left it in the taxi!'' In her dismay at the discovery Susanna unconsciously unbent a trifle. ''It had the tickets in it and—and everything!—Here, boy, put down that bag and see if you can catch the cab I came in!''

Doubtfully the porter deposited the traveling

bag at her feet and scuttled away and Susanna turned abruptly from her companion to hide her discomfiture. What a stupid thing to have done! She had always prided herself on her efficiency, her self-reliance, and it had failed her now at the most crucial moment! During the last few crowded hours she had planned every step of that triumphant return journey, she had meant to show this shameless creature, who had accepted her accusation without even attempting a denial, that she was as able as any man of her family to uphold and defend the name of Poindexter.—And now at the outset she had displayed the most idiotic feminine weakness by carelessly mislaying her bag with the tickets and all her available cash for the journey! How he must be laughing at her in his sleeve!

But there was no derision or even covert amusement in his voice when at last he broke the silence.

"Isn't there something I can do, Miss Poindexter?" He advanced a step toward her. "I doubt very much that the porter will be able to locate your taxi, for they are picked up quickly here, and it might take days to trace it. You have refused to allow me to defray my own expenses on this trip, but——?"

"There is nothing that you can do," Susanna

interrupted, annoyance with herself making her tone more vehement than she intended. That her own stupidity should have given him this opportunity to humiliate her was a crowning blow! Then the absurdity of the situation was borne in upon her and despite her dismay she felt a hysterical impulse to laugh. A self-confessed culprit—for to her mind silence brought confession—paying his own way to the just retribution which awaited him!

Garry caught the suspicion of a smile which lurked for an instant at the corners of her mouth, and his own eyes twinkled, but he was careful not to let her see it.

"Awl abo-oard!" The voice of the train announcer bawled in their ears just as the porter returned dolefully shaking his head.

" 'Nother somebody done taken dat cab right quick, lady," he said. "No han'-bag ain't been turned in at de los'-an'-foun' desk, neider. Sho is too bad!"

Susanna suddenly threw back her head and smiled.

"It really doesn't matter," she replied composedly. "Wait here, please; I will be back in a minute."

The request was seemingly addressed to the porter, but Garry recognized it as a command to

himself, also, and watched her as she made her way toward the ticket window in perplexity. What was this indomitable young person about to do now?

He had not observed that when the porter announced his failure Susanna had inadvertently clasped her hands together, but if he had seen the gesture he would not have known that it brought to her mind a way out of her dilemma. Her left hand had closed over the only article of real value which she possessed; her mother's engagement ring. Susanna knew that the small diamond in its old-fashioned heavy gold setting was flawless, and although a pang darted through her heart at the thought of parting from it, even temporarily, she knew that it must be done. For Sylvia's sake and the family pride, their mother herself would have wished it.

The man at the ticket window demurred at her proposition, but she pleaded with desperate earnestness, and finally she was directed to a nearby establishment where the transaction was adjusted and she returned to her charge, breathless but triumphant, just as the gates were closing.

Susanna refused Garry's assistance in boarding the train, but he noticed that one of her hands had been stripped of its glove, and comprehension came to him. She must have placed a jewel—

perhaps her only one—as security for a loan to cover their journey! He had sufficient money in his pocket to pay for a dozen such trips! Confound it, why hadn't she been sensible and permitted him to lend it to her; she might have known that he would ultimately compel her to accept the amount of his own share, and that he was simply humoring her now! Then he realized that her present opinion of him must be despicable indeed and he groaned in spirit. What a revenge that little blonde vixen of a sister of hers had taken upon him for flouting her pride!

The berths had already been made up in the sleeper and all but two of them were occupied, as the drawn curtains attested. Susanna stopped before the first vacant one, near the end of the car by which they had entered, and held out a ticket and envelope to him.

"This is yours and here is your berth." She spoke in a carefully modulated undertone. "We will pay separately but breakfast at the same table in the dining-car at eight. I am taking it for granted that your word holds good until we reach Dexter."

"You will not need further assurance of it," he said gravely, adding: "Good-night."

She nodded without other response, and, turn-

ing, went down the aisle to where the porter stood beside her own open berth.

Garry turned in with a feeling of relief. She did not intend to make a public fool of him, anyway, though the situation would be awkward enough in all conscience; no one whom he knew contemplated a Western trip at that time, but the world was a small one and some little-suspected chance acquaintance might be among their traveling companions. It was evident that she did not trust him sufficiently to have suggested that they appear as strangers, and small wonder, under the circumstances, but he heartily wished, for her sake, that he had made the proposition himself to her. Lord, what a position, first one and then the other of these sisters, had placed him in!

Susanna awoke with the same confused sense of unreality which had possessed her on the morning after her arrival in New York, but recollection of the previous day's events came almost instantaneously, and she hastily arose. No doubt of Chanler's good faith had entered her mind; he might be a reprobate and libertine, but somehow she felt, without having questioned it, that his word once given would be as inviolate as her own. Whatever else might be justly held against him, he was no coward!

Garry had been up for an hour and was idly turning the pages of a magazine when she came toward him. He rose and met her in the aisle, conscious of curious eyes raised for a moment about them in sudden interest.

"Good-morning." She greeted him with the cool impersonality which was beginning to get upon his nerves. He couldn't expect her to be exactly friendly, but if they were to spend the next two days in enforced association she might at least thaw a little! Her lips were made for smiling and her eyes looked as though they were capable of softening with a very warm, friendly light. She had established an armistice between them, anyway, and he would play up.

"Good-morning." The formal dignity of his tone matched her own. "I trust that you were made comfortable."

"Quite, thank you." Did an irresistible hint of a smile touch her lips for an instant, as though she had read his thoughts? It passed so quickly that he could not be sure. "Shall we go in to breakfast?"

He assented silently and they made their way down the aisle to the vestibule, but a sudden lurch of the train sent him reeling back against the door and Susanna observed with quick misgiving that his face whitened and he grimaced as though in

pain. He had worn that look when she first confronted him in his own apartment on the previous day. What if the airplane accident had injured him, after all, and he had been unwilling to admit it?

When they were seated in the dining-car and had given their order, she leaned forward across the little table.

"Mr. Chanler, you should not have assured me that you were able to travel if you had not fully recovered from the effects of your fall. A few days' delay would have made no difference." There was a shade of concern in her voice, and—Jove! He had been right about her eyes! They could be friendly enough if she would only let down the bars!

"I am feeling quite fit, I assure you," he responded. "I wish, though, that you would tell me how you knew about the plane? Only three friends of mine were there when the accident occurred, and they agreed to say nothing about it. I—I had a wager on, you see, and I meant to have another try to win it."

"I overheard someone discussing it with you in your apartment in the Blandford yesterday before I knocked upon the door," Susanna explained hastily, but a slight color rose in her cheeks.

"Oh, that was Pete Bigelow! I could not

imagine how you found me until I remembered that I had given your brother my address, of course. Miss Poindexter, I want to make a suggestion if I may."

He paused as though uncertain how to continue, and Susanna's clear, steady eyes did not help.

"Go on, please."

"Should we encounter anyone on the train who knows either of us, would it not be—er—expedient to say that your brother had entrusted you to my escort home? The situation is not usual, you know," he stammered hastily as he saw her lips set.

"Nor, I should like to believe, is the circumstance which brought it about." The contempt in her tone flayed him. "If you meet any of your friends on board you are at liberty to offer them any excuse for your journey that you find convenient, of course. I do not consider it necessary to explain or give an account of myself to anyone."

Garry could have shaken her for her wilful pride and perversity, but he merely bowed.

"As you please."

The meal proceeded in a frigid silence and at its conclusion Susanna remarked as they rose:

"You will want to find the smoker now, will

you not? I shall lunch at one, but it will not be necessary for you——"

"I'll join you before then, if I may," he interrupted hastily, aware all at once of the quizzical gaze of a stout, impressive dowager across the aisle. "Have you—er—magazines and things?"

"Thank you, I have everything that I require," Susanna replied stonily and he stood aside to let her pass.

But somehow she could not compose herself to read, and for the better part of the morning sat idly watching the country scud pass the window, until the scattered villages merged into a smoke-begrimed suburb and the train slackened and pulled into a huge, bustling terminal.

Then she rose and made her way to the end of the car but paused suddenly. She had come face to face with a young man just scrambling up the vestibule steps from the platform; an exceedingly stout young man with light, curly hair showing beneath his traveling cap and a comically turned-up nose. He averted his eyes at once, but not before Susanna had caught a gleam of unmistakable recognition in their depths and as she turned and hastened back precipitately to her seat a feeling of dismay akin to panic seized her.

It was Chanler's friend again! There could be

no doubt of it, and he had certainly remembered her from that first meeting beside the wrecked plane! She did not stop to ask herself how it could possibly be he when he had passed her hiding-place in the corridor of the Blandford on the previous afternoon and she had heard him announce that he was going to a dinner and afterward to his club.

One idea alone dominated her thoughts. He would, of course, encounter Garrison Chanler; that could not be helped, but he must not see them together, he must not know that either was aware of the other's presence on the train. If only a drawing-room had been vacant where she could remain in seclusion! Their own car was filled, fortunately, and Susanna determined not to leave it for the rest of the day. She had no doubt he would blurt out to Chanler that the girl who had rescued him was on board, but he must have no opportunity to point her out! She would die before she would have Chanler know!

CHAPTER XIII

GARRY ASKS HIMSELF A QUESTION

GARRY'S after-breakfast cigarette lost its flavor before it was half consumed. He threw it away and sat staring moodily out of the window of the smoker. His strained back throbbed with every motion of the train, but he was only subconsciously aware of it in his general dejection of mind. After his first natural resentment at the accusation against him, he had looked forward to the journey in a whimsical spirit of adventure, but somehow the zest appeared to have gone out of it and his former attitude seemed a bit unworthy in his own eyes.

Though the outcome of the affair had been a foregone conclusion, with a contrite Sylvia, a discomfited Susanna and himself, amused and magnanimous, as the central figures, it didn't appear so delectable now. It was a devil of a situation for a chap with a spark of decency to find himself in! He couldn't see himself in the role of the misunderstood but forgiving victim of a child's petty spite, and even when the truth were known

it would be a pretty difficult task to eradicate Susanna's first impression of him from her tenacious mind.

And he wanted her to think well of him! He had never wanted anything so tremendously before in his life! That was because there had never been a girl like her, of course. Since yesterday he had been looking at the world, his world, through her eyes, and the vision had awakened an entirely new set of emotions he hadn't known that he possessed. There had been something rather splendid about her serene disregard of convention, something in her direct and uncompromising attitude toward the situation as she believed it to exist that savored of the stern but heroic days of their pioneer forefathers.

In the half-dozen years since he had left the university Garry had heartily but evanescently been attracted to several successive girls who had been placed in his way by opportunist mammas; this one for her camaraderie, that for her proficient riding and golf and tennis, the others because they fitted in acceptably with his mood of the moment. Like most normal-minded males, exploited intellectuality had bewildered and dismayed him and sheer beauty had never held him for long.

Susanna had proved anything but a comrade,

though that was naturally what must be expected under the loathsome circumstances; she presumably knew the outdoor diversions of his set only by name, her character was too positive for her tamely to sink her own individuality in another's mood, and she was not noticeably intellectual nor exactly beautiful. And yet in retrospect the others seemed inane and almost pitifully uninteresting.

How she must despise him now as a Lothario, a menace to the susceptible affections of unsophisticated maidens! How she would still despise him, when she knew the truth, for spinelessly accepting her denunciation and tacitly leading her on to think the worst of him! He wriggled and then suppressed a groan at the protest of his wrenched back. It would be just his luck to be laid up at the journey's end and have her consider him a physical as well as moral weakling!

Why had he tried to fly that wretched old bus, anyway? He recalled the sickening fall when the earth seemed to rush up as though shot from a catapult, and the crash of impact which sent him into instant oblivion, to find Pete Bigelow hanging over him when he awakened, with a ridiculous tale about some girl having pulled him from the wreck. There was something queer about that; of course, Pete's imagination and inverted sense of humor

were responsible for the yarn, yet the mental suggestion had been potent enough to conjure up before him the vision of a woman's face. That in itself wasn't so remarkable, but the face, nebulous as it had been, had somehow taken on in his thoughts a likeness to that of Susanna Poindexter.

Garry was so lost in his disconsolate reverie that he had not heeded the halt of the train at a city nor noted when it started again, save by the renewed ache in his spine.

Ah, well, the situation couldn't be mended now by grouching over it! Garry got up at last and wandered through to the observation car only to find it deserted, and he dropped gloomily into a chair. He must go on to the end, cut as decent a figure as he could when the dénouement came, and then efface himself with all speed. Lee Poindexter was a sensible kid and he would understand and do what he could to mitigate the awkwardness of the occasion, but that was all he could hope for; Susanna could never regard him with anything but contempt.

Lost in the rumble of the train, the door at the end of the car had opened and closed, and a stout young man made his way down the aisle. He glanced indifferently at the back of Garry's head and then away, and it was not until he turned and

started to retrace his steps that he stopped in unutterable astonishment.

Garry looked up, then sprang from his chair, and for a moment the two friends eyed each other in half-incredulous recognition.

"What the devil are you doing here, Snipes!" The stout young man exploded at last.

"Pete!" Garry passed his hand across his forehead. "Lord, I thought at first that I was seeing things. Where in the world did you drop from?"

"That's what I want to know about you," the other retorted as he sat down heavily in the next chair. "When I got back to the house yesterday afternoon after leaving you in your rooms I found that Dad and that merger crowd had chartered a special to leave at six for Pittsburgh and he wanted me to go along. I haven't been in very good standing with the old man lately because some bookmaker has been beefing, so I jumped at the chance to get in solid once more. Now he has shipped me on to St. Louis to see a man for him, and Heaven knows when I'll hit the Big Town again. How is it that you're gadding off to the West without a word to anybody?"

"I had an unexpected message, just after you left me, in connection with the matter which took

me to Texas before and it was necessary for me to return at once and look into it personally," Garry replied glibly enough, for during his friend's somewhat lengthy explanation he had had time to formulate his own. His feeling of panic at the sudden complication which Pete's presence created was akin to that of Susanna, but from a far different cause. What if his companion discovered that he was traveling in the company of a strange girl? Pete was a confoundedly gregarious animal; it would be impossible to lose him for five minutes at a time. He foresaw hours of embarrassment ahead.

If the situation had been awkward before, it was unbearable now. They had been roommates at school and the university, and intimates ever since, but Garry found himself regarding the other's cheerful countenance now with positive aversion. Somehow Susanna must be kept in the background.

But what if she missed him and came looking for him? She thought him a despicable, untrustworthy cad; suppose she took it into her head that he might have broken his word and left the train at Pittsburgh? She might enter the observation car at any moment.

"Well, it's lucky." Pete settled back in his chair and beamed contentedly. "Thought I'd

have to worry along somehow by myself unless I could pick up some chaps in the smoker for a little game. How is that sprained back of yours?''

''Oh, all right,'' Garry responded in an absent tone. ''Let's go into the smoker for awhile anyway; I want a cigarette.''

His friend's words had given him an inspiration. The smoker! Susanna couldn't very well seek him there.

''A cigarette? You want some chow, you mean; it's lunch time,'' Pete remarked.

''I—I'm not hungry,'' protested Garry feebly.

''Nonsense! Thought you looked a little pale around the gills. It was a fool thing for you to start off like this without having the doctor look you over again. You don't think there may be anything wrong that he didn't discover, do you?''

His fat face was puckered with quick solicitude and Garry felt a shade of compunction for his irritation.

''Of course not!'' he retorted shortly, to hide his real feeling. ''Don't be an ass, Pete. Didn't I come out of it all right?''

''Yes, but sometimes you don't feel the effects of a fall like that for some time afterward.'' Pete shook his curly head. ''Lord, I shall never forget the sight of that plane diving nose down. I

thought we should never reach the spot, and I was sure you were a goner when I saw you lying there, and the girl—by Jove, I forgot."

"Forgot what?" demanded Garry testily for the other had halted as though words failed him. "I wish you'd cut out that idiotic story about a girl. You can't kid me, Pete——."

"But she's here. Right on this train. I ran into her as I climbed aboard." Pete's round eyes shone with excitement. "I forgot all about it in my surprise at seeing you."

"Here!" Garry shrugged in derision. "You've carried your idea of a joke just about far enough——"

"But she *is* on board, I tell you," Pete insisted. "I'd know her again in a million. Big gray eyes and brown hair—lots of it,—and carries herself like a little queen, though she isn't exactly little, either. What's more, she's got on the same hat, dark blue with little white wings all over it; I've tagged around to milliners enough with Natalie to know. But what's the matter? Have you seen her, too? You swore you didn't recall a thing about her."

Garry mumbled a hasty disclaimer, but his senses suddenly reeled. Gray eyes, brown hair, queenly bearing—and the hat. The hat with the little white wings. Good Lord, was he going

crazy? Had the girl been a reality, after all, and that reality Susanna?

"I think she recognized me, too," Pete went on, serenely unconscious of the impression his disclosure had made. "I would have been willing to wager that a sort of light came into her eyes before she turned away."

"She was probably admiring your manly form." Garry tried to speak banteringly, but his throat felt oddly dry.

"Go on, laugh at me if you want to," Pete retorted. "I tell you I saw her and it's the same girl, and I am going to take a walk through the train later. I wonder who she's traveling with; I might know them."

"You might!" Garry assented, with an emphasis that was lost upon his companion. The question was pounding into his brain with every rhythmic revolution of the car wheels: Was it Susanna? *Was* it? She had known of the accident to the plane, although they had no mutual friends and not an inkling of it had reached the press. Of course that conversation had taken place in his apartment, but Pete had gone before her arrival.

"It's a mighty strange coincidence, anyway," his companion went on equably. "Perhaps she has seen you, too, and recognized you. Aren't

you at all curious? I should think you would want to have a look at her, at least."

"Pete, if you are entertaining any hope that you are going to lead me up to a perfectly strange young woman and hear me thank her for saving my life, you are scheduled to be disappointed," Garry said firmly. "I've got business in Texas, and I don't propose to have her call the conductor and cause me to be put off the train as a dangerous lunatic. I'm not ungrateful and I would give a good deal to find the lady, if she really exists, but I've got to have surer proof of her identity than your first hasty impression. Heaps of girls have gray eyes and brown hair, and nine out of ten women wear dark blue when they travel. If we happen to run across her before we reach St. Louis I'd like to have you point her out to me, of course, but don't let her see you do it."

"All right." Pete assented with an injured air. "I've got eyes in my head and I know what I'm talking about, but have it your own way. I know I wouldn't pass up such a heaven-sent opportunity if I were in your boots, for this girl certainly is a wonder. Come on, let's go to lunch."

Garry rose. There was no use deferring it any longer and Susanna had as much as told him that she did not desire his company at luncheon. If

she were in the dining-car he would be compelled to ignore her, but, seeing him with another man, she ought to understand that the very contretemps which he mentioned that morning had taken place. He would escape at the first opportunity and explain the situation to her; that was the only course to pursue.

But Susanna was not in the dining-car, nor did she appear during the long hour while he sat playing with his food and watching Pete wade placidly through everything on the menu. Suppose she were waiting for him? He had said that he would join her before lunch time and she had not refused him permission; was she relying upon his word?

He grew more and more ill at ease and Pete's attempts to arouse him from his ill-humor drove him to the verge of madness. Back of his immediate anxiety, however, there loomed that ever-insistent question: Was Susanna the girl who had saved him? Only Pete could answer, and the fathead was sitting there gorging himself, as though food were the paramount thing in existence. How could he break away long enough to find Susanna and explain his defection?

The opportunity came when Pete ordered a second portion of ice cream.

"Look here, old man!" Garry leaned forward

with specious geniality. "I've just remembered some papers in my bag that I don't want to leave around loose. I'll get them and join you in the smoker right away; perhaps we can dig up a couple of chaps for bridge."

Pete nodded.

"Won't be long. I'll be with you in about five minutes."

Garry hastened into the next car and found Susanna in her seat, and so deeply immersed in her book that she did not glance up at his approach, although it seemed that a faint color tinged her smooth cheeks beneath the tan.

"Miss Poindexter." He halted beside her and spoke so low that his voice was scarcely audible above the rattle of the train. "I meant to join you before this, but it was impossible. An intimate friend of mine got on board at Pittsburgh and I couldn't have gotten away from him without the explanations of which you disapprove."

Susanna raised calm eyes.

"There was no reason why you should," she retorted coolly, although her heart was racing like a trip-hammer. They had met already. How much did he know, or guess? "We do not change cars until we reach St. Louis."

"But have you lunched?"

"Of course. I had it brought here." She

dropped her eyes to her book once more as though the conversation were ended, but he still lingered.

"There—there isn't anything that you would like me to do for you?" Garry stammered miserably. He was looking straight down at the blue hat with the little white wings. Was she——?

"No, Mr. Chanler." There was unmistakable dismissal in her tone. "Please don't concern yourself about me; I am quite accustomed to traveling alone and taking care of myself. Your friend will be waiting for you."

But Pete wasn't. He had finished his dessert, paid the check and walked through the smoker, but not finding Garry there he had started in search of him. At that precise moment he was standing spellbound at the end of their car, taking in the scene before him with protruding eyes and dropped jaw, and had Garry looked up then his question would have been answered. But he did not, and the next instant Pete had turned abruptly and vanished.

CHAPTER XIV

"WHILE EAST IS EAST——!"

WHEN Garry entered the smoking car he found Pete already seated and staring out of the window with elaborate pre-occupation.

"Had quite a hunt for those papers, but I found them," he announced with specious mendacity. "What's up, Pete? You look as though you had eaten the canary."

Pete had turned as Garry seated himself opposite, and his round face flushed, but he responded with dignity:

"Nothing at all. I've been thinking that I ought to get to work on some papers that Dad gave me to look over before I meet his man tomorrow."

Garry stared. Everybody seemed to be turning him down this afternoon.

"Don't tell me you're going in for business with a capital B!" he exclaimed. "How long is this spasm going to last?"

"I don't know. A fellow's got to be serious once in a while, and I've made more kinds of a

fool of myself than the average." There was a trace of bitterness in Pete's tone.

"Why the sudden fit of remorse?" inquired Garry. "Too much lunch? I warned you——."

"Oh, cut it," the other cried in exasperation. "You were grouchy enough yourself all through lunch. If you'd given me a hint that I was de trop——"

"Look here, Pete, what are you driving at?" Garry was instantly serious.

"Nothing." Pete turned again to the window. "How was I to know I was butting in? If you hadn't been so darned secretive——."

"Don't be an ass." Garry had done some quick thinking. "You saw me speak to a young lady in the next car just now? Met her in Texas; I know her brother there."

"Indeed?" Pete's tone was meant to be bitingly ironic, but he could not sustain the pose. "Who's trying to kid now? Oh, I don't doubt that you knew the lady and her brother in Texas. It's funny, that's all, that you didn't recognize her on Saturday and denied her existence ever since, but it's your own affair. We've shared everything from Second Readers to shrapnel, but if you wanted to hold out on me now you might at least have shut me up before lunch when I was raving like an idiot."

"You didn't recognize her on Saturday." The phrase sang in Garry's ears and he did not hear another word of his friend's speech. So it was Susanna, after all. But was Pete absolutely certain?

"I don't know what you are talking about," he retorted defensively. "Miss Poindexter has been visiting friends in New York, she tells me, and I did not even know she was in the East until she boarded the train. If you imagine that *she* is the girl——."

Pete turned a cold eye upon him.

"Snipes, don't insult my intelligence, whether you are willing to credit me with any or not. If I'm not supposed to have seen her drag you out of that wrecked plane and then kneel beside you with her head on your chest, why, I didn't that's all. It isn't my affair. I guess I can trust the evidence of my own eyes, though."

"I wonder if you can, old man," Garry said very gravely. "Would you be willing to take an oath that she was the girl you saw? I want you to be dead certain before you speak, for I swear I told you the truth. I wasn't conscious of any girl's presence after the old bus dropped; I thought until today that you were joking, and even when you told me that she was on the train

I didn't connect her at first with Miss Poindexter."

"Holy Cat!" Pete's eyes widened. "What a situation! Of course, it's the same girl; I'd swear it on a stack of bibles. But didn't you say anything about it to her just now?"

"There must be lots of other girls on the train and I couldn't be sure that you had referred to her until this minute, could I?" Garry temporized. "I haven't the least intention of mentioning it either, until we get to Texas! That is, if I happen to be in her neighborhood again."

"You're not going to let her know that you know?" Pete demanded incoherently. "Of all the ungrateful fish——."

"It isn't that; you don't understand," Garry protested.

"No. I'll confess that I don't," retorted Pete with emphasis. "I know that if a girl like that risked her life to save mine I would have the common decency to say 'thank you,' but nobody ever did."

"Can't you see?" Garry explained. "You told me yourself that she disappeared as soon as you came and before she knew I'd recovered consciousness, and that shows that she didn't want me to recognize her; I'm certainly not going to

embarrass her now by referring to it. She's dreadfully shy," he added on a swift inspiration. "She looks self-contained and all that, but I have never been able to get more than two words out of her. She has never been off her brother's ranch before, I understand, and she has a perfect horror of meeting strangers. That's why I haven't asked permission yet to present you."

"Don't trouble," Pete said loftily. "I've got to put in a lot of work on those papers, anyway; I won't have any too much time before tomorrow to get the dope straight on them."

"Well," Garry got to his feet, glad of a chance to escape. He wanted to get away somewhere with his own thoughts. "I'll look you up later and maybe we can have that rubber."

He made his way back to his own car, but Susanna did not look up as he passed her and when he reached his seat he fished a magazine at random from his bag and then sat with it unopened, gazing with unseeing eyes out of the window.

Convinced of Pete's sincerity he could still scarcely credit the truth. Susanna had saved his life at the hazard of her own. Of course, she hadn't known then who he was, but the fact that she would have taken precisely the same risk for any other stranger didn't militate against the

obligation under which he was placed. How disgusted she must have been when she learned that the man she had come to take back to Texas at the point of a gun, if necessary, was the aviator who had fallen at her feet.

But how and when had she learned his identity? It must have been sometime between Saturday and Monday afternoon when she presented herself at the Blandford. Then another thought came to him. What if she had seen him somewhere around Dexter and recognized him when she pulled him from the wreck? That must be the explanation; that was why she had disappeared so quickly, so that she might not have to listen to his expression of gratitude. Well, he would spare her that, at least, until they reached the Circle Six and explanations were in order. It was a satisfaction to know that he could render her that small service even though she were unaware of it. By why had the fates not been kind and brought them together in Dexter? Why had he been idiot enough to sympathize with that little minx of a sister of hers and let her put him in this outrageous position?

He had heard somewhere that people were supposed to feel kindlily toward those for whose continued existence a brave effort of theirs was responsible; would Susanna ever come to feel

kindly toward him? She had knelt beside him with her head upon his breast, and he had lain there supine, unconscious of it.

But had he been? He recalled that impression, vague and shadowy but persistent, of a woman's face close to his own. No wonder it had come to take on a semblance of that of Susanna. If only it had been clearer.

He roused himself with an impatient movement and opened the magazine. What was the use of milling it over and over in his mind? Of course, it was a humiliating position to find himself in, it wouldn't be exactly pleasant for any right-minded chap to be accused of philandering with the affections of an unsophisticated young girl, and he might just as well make up his mind to it that Susanna would never look at him with anything but contempt, even when she knew the truth.

Why should he care so tremendously what she thought of him? They belonged to different worlds, she of the West and he of the East, and, though their traditions were fundamentally the same, their training and environment had placed them as far apart as the poles. When this hideous misunderstanding had been threshed out he would shake the dust of Texas from his feet forever and their paths would never cross again. He would go back and take up his work, and ride and play

bridge and dance and flirt his way through season after season of débutante crops, each one a replica of the other, until his hair grew thin and he became one of the old guard who formed the background of opera boxes and the mainstay of wallflowers. Lord, what a prospect.

Had he possessed eyes in the back of his head Garry might have seen that Susanna was not so engrossed in her book as she appeared. She had been acutely conscious of him when he passed her and more than once her eyes strayed to where he sat, their gray depths clouded with a question. Did he know? Could it be that he was generous enough not to speak of it under the present circumstances? It did not seem consistent that a lady-killer, a creature who looked upon all women, even a simple child like Sylvia, as legitimate prey would possess finer feeling, yet he had made her distasteful task as easy as he could so far. He had been deference itself and not by word or look had he given the slightest indication of the character which she had conjured up in her thoughts. Could it be that he was really as bad as Sylvia had painted him? For the first time a little shadow of doubt crept into Susanna's mind. What if she had misunderstood Sylvia's words, had placed a wrong construction upon a childish outburst which really meant nothing.

But, no. Her unexpected appearance had surprised him, but not her accusation; he had taken it too quietly for that, and he had attempted no denial because he must have realized that it would be useless. What a pity! There was something likable about him, Susanna was forced to admit that to herself, something boyish and seemingly straightforward and sincere that would have deceived anybody who was not forewarned of what must be his true character.

It had even been difficult for her to maintain her attitude of stony aloofness in the face of his wistful attempts to placate her, but that was all just a part of his game, of course. Susanna gave herself a little mental shake. Why should she try to find excuses for the man. Where was her loyalty, her family pride? In a previous generation he would have been shot down without an opportunity to explain or atone, and rightfully, too. There was no reason why she should weaken and feel sorry for him just because he had lain helpless and suffering at her feet. He deserved no mercy, and yet—why had he turned out to be what he was?

The afternoon waned and when the first dinner call came Susanna hurriedly ordered hers brought to her. She would not give him another oppor-

tunity to court a refusal. Why hadn't he joined that odious fat friend of his, anyway?

Her meal was before her on a narrow table when he passed with merely a gravely courteous bow. She had eaten little lunch, in her agitation at "Pete's" unexpected appearance on the scene, but she felt now as though the food choked her and an intense loathing of the part she was playing came over her. It was her duty, she told herself sternly; she had but carried out the traditions of her family, but her anticipated triumph was as dust and ashes in her mouth.

Garry meanwhile had routed out a bored and lonely Pete and carried him off to dinner, but for the first time in their lives a slight barrier had reared itself between them and awkward silences fell which neither could bridge without obvious effort. In mutual self-defense they joined a game of stud in the smoking car after the uncomfortable meal was over and it was late when they broke up.

"It will be cooler tonight, anyway," Pete remarked, as they paused for a moment in the vestibule of the car, before separating. "Hear that thunder? It looks as though we were riding straight into the teeth of a storm."

"It's likely to be a bad one." Garry nodded. "Hope we don't strike a washout."

"There's small chance of that at this time of year," remarked Pete. " 'Night. You change at St. Louis, don't you?"

"Yes. By Jove, that lightning is sharp, isn't it? I'll see you before we reach the station in the morning."

To Susanna, lying sleepless in her berth, the storm came as a welcome diversion from her thoughts. She had weathered too many northers in Texas to feel any apprehension and the roll of thunder and play of jagged forks of lightning like tongues of white fire through a rift in her curtains brought a sense of relieved tension to her taut nerves. The rain drove in swirling sheets against the window and the wind rose above the roar of the train which rocked and swayed with increased momentum as though fleeing from the path of the storm. Somewhere within the car a baby awoke and wailed thinly, and nervous feminine voices arose.

Susanna lay quiet amid the subdued hubbub, but despite herself her thoughts strayed again to Chanler. Was he sleeping through it all? He had not approached her since her rebuff of the afternoon and he would probably not do so until the time came to change at St. Louis. She was relieved by his attitude, of course; it would have been odious if he had forced his insufferable at-

tentions upon her for the sake of what their fellow travelers might think, and he had doubtless been just as glad himself when her manner tacitly freed him from her society. Naturally he hated her as the Nemesis which had dogged him and brought him back to retribution. Yet there had been no dislike in his voice, and his eyes, although there was nothing abject in their expression, had reminded her uncomfortably of those of a friendly dog unjustly repulsed.

A sharper, crackling peal of thunder broke in upon her thoughts and the train lurched and slid for a space as the shrieking wheels sought to regain their grip upon the rails. Had they been struck? Susanna raised her hand to turn on the light when a hideous detonation fairly split her ears and she could feel herself lifted bodily into space. Then, in a jumble of rending wood and strange, animal-like cries something descended upon her with crushing force and the world was blotted out.

It was a dream, of course. That was the first vague thought which came to Susanna, but why didn't she waken? It was strange that she could imagine so vividly those cold drops beating down upon her face like rain, and she wanted very much to open her eyes, but something seemed to hold

the lids down and a numbing lethargy encompassed her limbs.

Queer sounds, hoarse but subdued like far-away shouting, came confusedly to her ears, but nearer, so near that she could almost feel a breath upon her face, a low tone, shaken with emotion yet oddly familiar, seemed repeating something over and over. What was that about "East and West"?

Instinctively Susanna struggled to waken, to hear, to respond, and then all at once the words came to her clearly and distinctly:

"You'll never know it, but I love you. I shall love you while East is East and West is West."

It was a dream, indeed, for the voice was the voice of Garrison Chanler.

CHAPTER XV

A DREAM STILL-BORN

WHEN Susanna awakened in very truth the dream was so vividly implanted on her consciousness that for some time she lay going over its every detail in her memory. It was odd that, though it had been so vague and confused, the impressions that it left were as startlingly distinct as though she had actually lived through such a scene. She seemed again to hear Garrison Chanler's voice in her ears, she who had heard those words from no man in all her life. By what strange process of imagining had it been he, of all people, whose voice had come to her?

She could feel her face grow hot at the very thought and turned to bury it in the pillow when the pungent fragrance of dried lavender assailed her nostrils, mingled with a sharper, sweetish odor, and the bed seemed suddenly to have grown much softer than the berth had been. It was quiet, too; the motion of the train had ceased and nothing broke the stillness but a cheerful little buzzing like that of a bee——.

Susanna opened her eyes and gasped. She was lying in a wide, old-fashioned bed with tall, curly posts, and a whitewashed wall sloped sharply down beyond its foot, broken by a gabled window. It was hung with gay chintz curtains blowing in a sunny breeze and through them she could see a mass of waving green foliage while a fat bumble-bee nosed inquisitively at the screen.

She wasn't dreaming still. Susanna wriggled experimentally and then sat up to make sure. She was most certainly awake and in a strange house, but how had she come to be here and where was "here," anyway? She had gone to bed on the train and the thunderstorm had come, and then a crash and after that her dream . . .

But had it been a dream, after all? How much of it had been reality? The rain falling upon her upturned face, the distant shouts, the strange lethargy which had weighed her down, Garrison Chanler's voice in her ears——. But the last must have been sheer delirium, of course. She had been ill, hurt——

Yet she wasn't hurt, she hadn't an ache or a pain. Susanna felt of her head and drew one knee up after the other, then sat hugging them meditatively. There had been an accident, that much was clear, but she had no memory of extricating herself from it. She might conceivably

have fainted, but she had always thought that fainting meant temporary oblivion, not the freakish, distorted fancies of a sick brain. Chanler could not have been near, she had only imagined his voice, and yet how it seemed to echo still in her ears.

Where was he now? Great heavens, she had rescued him from one wreck only to precipitate him into another. Was he lying even now pinned down and helpless in the débris of the demolished train, or—or dead, perhaps?

Cold hands seemed clutching at her throat as Susanna sprang from the bed, but she was forced to seize one of its spiral posts for support as the room darkened for a moment and everything appeared to be whirling around her. Then the faintness passed and as her vision cleared and the roaring in her ears subsided she heard a masculine voice from the other side of the thin wall.

"That claim agent is a bird. My beauty may not be damaged to any visible extent, but if he thinks the road isn't going to pay me for waltzing into St. Louis this evening in a pair of overalls and a mackintosh he's got another guess coming. And Dad is a bondholder, too—Wow!"

Assuredly that was the voice of the fat young man, again. Not even a catastrophe could separate them for long from the ubiquitous Mr. Peter

Bigelow. There could be only one person in that farmhouse to whom he would speak so familiarly and Susanna waited tensely to hear the reply.

"Soft pedal, Pete. You may disturb her. We don't know yet——"

The tone, lowered at first, dwindled to an indistinguishable murmur but Susanna had heard enough to relieve her anxiety and she smiled to herself as she turned to dress. Chanler was close at hand and he too must be unhurt or his friend would not have been talking cheerful nonsense.

But how was she to dress? There was not a vestige of apparel in the room except a nightgown and an unfamiliar bathrobe of masculine cut, both rainsoaked and torn to ribbons. For the first time Susanna glanced down at herself to discover that she was clad in a straight garment of coarse white cotton with crocheted work about the neck and wrists, and the full force of "Pete's" remarks came home to her. Were all their belongings lost in the wreck? Must she wire home, after all, to Wes or Lee?

While she stood pondering, a flat-footed step sounded on the creaking boards outside and the doorknob turned softly. A woman looked cautiously in and smiled broadly when she saw the girl standing before her. She was a buxom, rosy-cheeked woman of middle-age with thick braids

of tow-colored hair wound coronet-fashion around her head and when she spoke it was with a pronounced accent.

"You bane better? Dat's nice. You should have coffee now, and some clothes. I guess I fix you pretty good."

"You are very kind," Susanna replied. "Where is this, please, and can you tell me what has happened? I suppose our train must have been wrecked?"

"It vas a freight first dat went off de rails." The beaming face clouded and the woman shook her head. "Always I vas afraid ven my man vorked on de road, before ve got dis farm. Your engineer could not to see de signals in de storm and ven he hit de freight all your cars joost pile up beside de track, but only a few bane hurt, t'ank God. Your brodder and his friend, dey bring you here."

Her brother! Garrison Chanler had had the effrontery——. Then she realized that he must have given such an explanation in order to shield her and perhaps remain near. It had been thoughtful, of course, but why had a perverse fate given him this opportunity to render her a service? She wanted nothing from him, nothing. Her task would have been far easier if he had accompanied her unwillingly and been sullen and

resentful; now it would be doubly difficult to maintain her attitude. There could be no doubt but that she had heard his voice somewhere near when she lay semi-conscious in the rain, but of course she had misunderstood the words themselves. What could such a man as he know of love?

Mrs. Lindholm brought steaming coffee and new-laid eggs and then arrayed her in a bright pink gingham frock which had to be taken in vastly about the waist, and a pair of flat-heeled black slippers that flapped absurdly from the slim ankles encased in coarse white cotton hose. Not wishing to offend her kindly hostess Susanna submitted to having her heavy hair braided and wound smoothly about her head after the manner in which the older woman wore hers and when the operation was completed Mrs. Lindholm regarded her with satisfaction.

"You look joost like a little girl going to a party," she beamed. "Dot dress ain't so right, maybe, for de city, but my silk one vouldn't fit nowheres, and I got a cape you can vear. Ve vould be glad to have you stay, but your brodder says you must go on by de afternoon train; dey bane clearing de track now."

"How far is this from where the accident happened?" Susanna asked.

"Joost over de pasture; you could see it from down by de chicken house. Your brudder, he vorry his head off," she nodded briskly from the door. "I go tell him you are all right now."

When the door had closed behind her hostess, Susanna surveyed herself in the small mirror with misgiving. The image it gave back to her was that of a quaint, old-fashioned picture, but its charm was lost upon her. She looked so ridiculously young. It was years since she had worn anything but the rough garments of the ranch and plain traveling attire for her infrequent visits to Mammon City and she felt ill at ease in the bright, billowing gown.

There was no help for it, however. She must face Chanler and his friend sooner or later and it was not her propensity to put off the inevitable. Yet at the door Susanna hesitated in sudden reluctance. The first few moments would be difficult after last night. She had no idea how she had gotten out of the train, no memory of anything after the crash came until she lay on the ground and heard that voice in her ears.

"I love you. While East is East——." What if she had not been mistaken, if he had actually uttered those words. Susanna flushed scarlet at the thought and her breath came in a little quivering gasp. It could not be. He would never have

dared to avow love to her. But what had been the first words she thought she had distinguished? "You will never know it——." They re-echoed as though he himself had spoken in his own defense and Susanna covered her ears. Was she going mad?

Resolutely she opened the door and descended the narrow, immaculately scrubbed stairs to the little entry and out upon the porch. Honeysuckle and morning-glory vines trailed about it and countless bees hummed among the flowers in the old-fashioned garden, but no one was visible and after a moment Susanna went down the steps and around a side path toward the orchard. It had been planted upon a rising slope beyond the chicken houses, and she hoped that from there a glimpse might be obtained of the railroad.

She was clothed after a fashion, but her greatest problem remained; her ticket and the money with which to continue their journey. Come what may, they must go on to the end.

The branches of the trees hung low with their heavy burden of fast-ripening apples and their fragrant odor was heady as new wine. Between two distant clusters of farm buildings Susanna caught a glimpse of shining rails and a knot of men gathered about a hideous mass of piled-up wreckage, and at the sight a dizzy, sick feeling

came over her once more. She looked about and then sat down weakly under a tree. Mrs. Lindholm had said that only a few were hurt and Susanna was usually levelheaded, but now she shuddered uncontrollably. It was a miracle that they had escaped uninjured, and if anything had happened to Garrison Chanler it would have been her fault.

She would take the same chance over again, knowing what lay ahead, she told herself doggedly; there had been only one course for her to pursue from the moment when Sylvia had confided in her and she had not stopped to count the possible cost. The thought of a wreck had not entered her mind, but neither had this other contingency which had arisen like a spectre and which must haunt her until she could be sure that it had been just a figment of her overwrought imagination.

She had been so buried in her musing that the sound of light, brisk footsteps through the soft grass had not penetrated to her consciousness and it was with a start that Susanna looked up to find Garrison Chanler standing before her.

He was clad in faded overalls and a soft shirt open at the neck, which revealed the bronzed column of his throat and splendid breadth of chest, and the sun filtering through the branches

overhead flecked his brown hair with gold. Susanna did not note his appearance, however, for his eyes had caught hers and held them, and what she read there made her tremble all at once, and a strange, tingling warmth stole through her veins. The next moment she had wrenched her gaze away and a cold wave of consternation swept over her. It was true. He cared for her. Whatever he was, whatever he had been, that light in his eyes had been unmistakable, even to one as unversed in love as she.

A mist seemed to have risen over the sunny orchard and it was from far away that she heard her own voice saying coldly but with shaken tones:

"I must thank you and your friend for bringing me here last night and seeing that Mrs. Lindholm took care of me."

Garry started. He had thought her wonderful in her plain, dark traveling dress which could not conceal her rich, warm coloring and the splendid lines of her figure, but this new Susanna, in the billowing pink frock with her soft bands of shining hair and that strange, shy, questioning look in her eyes, held him speechless before her. When she averted her eyes and spoke, the chill formality of her tone was like a dash of cold water and the grim irony of the situation descended upon him with renewed force.

"It was nothing. You have quite recovered? A doctor who happened to be one of our fellow passengers said that you had merely fainted but there were so many who required attention that we feared his examination had been too hurried. Miss Poindexter." He paused and then went on desperately: "I told Mrs. Lindholm that I was your brother. You must forgive me, but I thought it was best under the circumstances."

"I quite understand." Susanna made as if to rise, but he forestalled her by seating himself on a low heap of old fence rails.

"Please don't go. I—I shan't disturb you, but there is something that I want to explain, if I may." He hesitated again. "Mrs. Lindholm told you that my friend, Peter Bigelow, was with me. He is the one who got on board at Pittsburgh and he goes as far as St. Louis on the train which the company is sending out for us all this afternoon. I shall have to present him."

"Why not?" Susanna elevated her eyebrows, but she could not bring herself quite yet to look at him again.

"I did not wish to force him upon your acquaintance yesterday, but he saw me talking to you after lunch and I felt obliged to tell him that I met you and your brother in Texas and we had encountered each other again in the station at

New York. I am speaking of it now only because he may refer to it himself." Garry fumbled awkwardly in the pocket of his shirt. "There is another matter. The claim agent for the road has been here—all our baggage was lost, you know,—and I took it upon myself to settle for you. If you fought the road they could drag the case out for weeks and months, and I knew you were anxious to get back to Texas. Do you think that five hundred dollars will cover your loss?"

" 'Five hundred!' " Susanna repeated, staring at the little packet of bills he held out to her. "Mr. Chanler, except for my ticket and a small sum of money, one hundred would have paid for everything I had with me."

It was the first naive remark Garry had heard from her and despite the dull ache which had lain at his heart since the self-revelation of the night before, a faint smile played for a moment about his lips.

"Take it, Miss Poindexter. I wouldn't worry about the railroad; they will more than make it up from other luckless passengers." His face was grave once more and Susanna could not have guessed, as she took the roll of bills somewhat doubtfully from him and tucked it into the breast of the little pink gown, that the agent had settled for a far more modest claim and the bulk of her

new-found capital had come from Garry's own money belt. "If you think it is too much, you can always send them back a check for their conscience fund, if they have one. Here comes my friend now."

Pete, in his own pajama jacket and a pair of overalls which bulged alarmingly, had appeared from behind the chicken house, hesitated for a moment and then ducked for cover, but at Garry's peremptory wave he came diffidently forward and acknowledged the formal introduction with a dignity which his eccentric appearance did not warrant.

For the first time his presence on the scene was welcome to Susanna and she greeted him cordially.

"I wish you would tell me just what happened last night. Mrs. Lindholm says we ran into a derailed freight, but I don't remember anything after the crash came until I woke up a little while ago," she explained hastily, aware that Garry had darted a quick apprehensive glance at her.

"That's about all there is to tell," he responded, before Pete could speak. "People just dug each other out of the general mess and piled out in the rain and the farmers hereabout came down and divided us up as house guests for the night. I have been explaining to Miss Poindexter how

it came about that she had an extra brother added to her family this morning."

He turned to Pete, who regarded him with withering disgust.

"Is that the way you tell it?" he demanded. "Miss Poindexter, when I came to after the crash my feet were through a window and my head rammed into somebody's dressing-bag, I got out the way my feet started and went to look for Garry. Your car was turned over in the ditch and he was storming over it like a raging bull with a couple of husky trainmen trying to hold him back and a dozen passengers yelling that everybody was out and there was danger of fire——"

"Don't be idiotic, Pete!" Garry growled, but the other was not to be silenced.

"There was danger of fire, only the rain prevented it spreading," he insisted firmly. "Just as I got up to him Garry shouted something and dived in through a window and when I followed he was digging you out of a heap of smashed woodwork and general wreckage."

"Oh—h!" Susanna's stern frigidity melted away and her eyes were big and shining mistily as in spite of her resolution they sought Garry's once more. "So it was you! I mean, I thought it must have been, when I learned that you and

your friend were here, too. I—I don't know what to say——"

She found herself floundering desperately for words, but Pete came to the rescue.

"I helped, you know," he reminded her modestly. "Did you chance to observe this morning the dressing gown which you had been wearing, Miss Poindexter? I took that off a pompous old gentleman who was sitting in the ditch bemoaning the loss of his pet golf sticks and he is going to sue me. Besides, your rescue wasn't half as spectacular as Garry's last Saturday. You have heard about the accident to his airplane?"

Susanna was stricken into silence, but a warm color flooded her face and as she dropped her eyes Garry leaned forward.

"Miss Poindexter, a lady risked her life to save my more or less worthless one and then disappeared before I could express my gratitude. I meant to find her if I had to search the world, but a matter of even greater importance intervened; a matter which would brook no delay. I know now that the lady will never accept my thanks and it may be that she heartily regrets her action, but nevertheless I shall be forever in her debt."

Susanna rose somewhat shakily to her feet and stood looking from one to the other with a little

uncertain smile, the first which Garry had ever seen upon her face.

"Perhaps the—the lady owes you a debt, too, Mr. Chanler. Will you credit her with less honesty in its payment than yourself? I—I think I shall go into the house and rest for awhile. No, don't rise, please; I can manage quite well by myself."

She nodded and moved off through the trees, and Pete gazed after her in blank amazement.

"Say, what's gotten into you two?" he demanded at last. "You act as the North and South must have done, on the first Memorial Day."

"No, it's East and West." Garry shook his head. "There isn't even a grave to decorate, Pete. One can't bury a dream that was never even born."

CHAPTER XVI

DACON ACHESON TAKES THE DEAL

THE train which was sent out to gather in the stalled refugees from the wreck was late and it was nearly midnight when they drew into the Union Station at St. Louis. Throughout the run both Susanna and Garry had clung with suspicious cordiality to Pete, but that bewildered young man became wary at length and escaped to the smoker. They had maintained a voluble if somewhat incoherent conversation but with his departure a constraint fell upon them and only when the silence became unendurable did Susanna speak.

"Are you sure that there is a train out for Fort Worth with which we can make connections?" Without realizing it she had relinquished the leadership of their journey to Garry and as unconsciously he had assumed it.

"As sure as the time-table can make me," he responded. "You don't think it would be wiser for you to rest over night in a hotel in St. Louis and start for Fort Worth in the morning?"

Susanna was a quaint figure in Mrs. Lindholm's voluminous beaded cape, but Garry thought that her face looked drawn and tired under the swaying lamps and he longed to draw that weary, indomitable head down upon his shoulder, even while he put the thought sternly from him. During the long hours of the previous night, after the knowledge had come to him that he loved her, he had fought his battle and won, but the victory had left him battered and bruised in spirit and heart. One resolve alone burned high within him; he would play the hand which an ironic destiny had dealt him and then quit the game without a murmur that the cards had been stacked against him. Susanna should never dream that he cared.

Susanna herself was in a state of mind that bordered on chaos, and too utterly spent to seek to analyze it. She only knew that she longed with all her heart to be at home again, and in answer to his question she shook her head.

"No. We have been delayed too long already. If I can get a drawing-room on the train out of St. Louis I need not appear until we reach Fort Worth and there will be time to shop." She glanced at the much-worn suit of ministerial black and the shabby bag which Garry had succeeded in purchasing from Lars Lindholm and added: "You have all that you will require until then?"

"Yes, thanks. I was more fortunate than Mr. Bigelow, you see; it is a pity that nature endowed him more generously than our Swedish friend." Garry essayed a smile. "He looks rather like a filled hot water bag in that mackintosh, doesn't he?"

Susanna was saved from the necessity of a reply by the reappearance of Pete himself, but the derided mackintosh had been replaced by a light overcoat of decidedly sporting tendencies as to cut, and he wore a loud-checked cap upon his head.

"Nifty, isn't it?" he asked as he paused beside Garry's seat. "Had my eye on the chap who wore this from the minute he got on the train."

"Pete!" Garry exclaimed. "You didn't——?"

"Oh, I would have murdered him for it cheerfully, only it wasn't necessary; I watched him play three hands before I sat in the game and I knew he was my meat. Hello, we're getting in."

The train was slackening and Susanna rose and held out her hand.

"Goodbye, Mr. Bigelow. If you are ever in Texas, near a little cow-town called Dexter, you will find a welcome at the Circle Six. The ranch gates are never closed."

"Dexter? By Jove, that's funny. I heard that name in Pittsburgh in connection with some new

activity——" He broke off and shook her hand heartily to cover his confusion. "Thanks, Miss Poindexter. I'll remember, and when next you are in New York I hope you will let me present my sister. She'll be happy to show you anything you may have missed on your first visit."

Susanna smiled to herself, but there was time for no more, for the train stopped and in the station Pete took his leave.

"Sit here while I go and see about your drawing-room." Garry led Susanna to a seat and was gone before she could protest. She sank into it and sat apathetically watching the belated travelers hurrying by. They would be in Fort Worth by the following night and home the next afternoon. And then——? Susanna closed her eyes as though to shut out the scene which rose unbidden before her. She would at least have fulfilled her duty and upheld the traditions of the family, and, afterward, if the Circle Six did not pass out of their hands, she supposed that life would go on just the same.

Once more, against her will, the possibility of some ghastly mistake having been made arose to confront her, but she thrust it from her almost in fear. If she dared to entertain such a thought she would not have strength to complete the journey, and Susanna took herself sternly to task.

The very fact that this man had so easily fancied himself infatuated with her proved his instability of character and she must not be weak enough to try to find excuses for him. The scene in Sylvia's room in the moonlight had somehow lost its sharp poignancy and seemed blurred and unreal, but that was because so much had happened in the interval. The ugly fact could not be glossed over by any specious argument even though he had come to her rescue in the wreck, but the course which she had taken appeared all at once cheap and needlessly melodramatic in her own eyes and she was glad that the little revolver which had played so farcical a part was buried in the débris of the derailed train.

By good fortune a drawing-room proved to be vacant on the flyer to Fort Worth and Susanna retired thankfully to it. Shaken by the experience through which she had passed and the mental upheaval that had followed in its train she was asleep almost before they pulled out of the station, and kept herself secluded all the following day, though Garry came several times to her door with formal inquiries as to whether he might be of service.

As the country flying past the window grew more and more familiar to her eyes, an inexplicable revulsion of feeling came to Susanna and

she found that she dreaded the end of the journey as much as she had formerly looked forward to it. It was merely because the whole affair was so hideous, so sordid, she assured herself, but the assurance somehow lacked conviction.

At Fort Worth Garry came to assist her from the train and in the station she looked at him in consternation.

"You are ill. You were hurt in that wreck, or—or the airplane accident, and you wouldn't tell me," she accused. "You wanted to stop over in St. Louis last night and I would not listen! What must you think of me?"

"That is beside the question, isn't it?" he asked quietly. "I am not ill, Miss Poindexter, but the next train does not leave for Mammon City until ten o'clock tomorrow morning——"

"I know," Susanna interrupted quickly. "Our attorney's sister lives here and she will take me in for the night, while you can find a very good hotel just over the way, but I—I'm sure there is something wrong! You look really ill."

Garry was, but he lied valiantly. The wrenched nerves and muscles of his spine had suffered from the added strain of his effort to extricate Susanna from the wreck and the throbbing ache had sharpened to a darting agony which shot up to his brain, but it was as nothing compared to the hopeless

wretchedness of his thoughts. He loved her, and he could never tell her so; the very ruffian who, with his gang of rustlers, had hunted and shot down her brother would have a greater chance with her than he! Had ever a man been so placed? Why had he been too cursedly proud to put up a fight for himself at the start and proclaim his innocence even while he expressed his readiness to return with her and face whatever charge that absurd child had brought against him? Susanna might at least have respected him then!

All night he tossed restlessly upon his bed at the hotel and in the morning had to goad his flagging energies to a round of the shops in order to procure a more suitable outfit before he met her at the station. That day would see the end of the sorry adventure, at any rate, and by nightfall he would be free to turn his face eastward once more, alone.

When they met to board the train Susanna had exchanged the bulky cape and bright gingham frock for a suit of sober brown and her manner was as serenely aloof as at the start of their journey. Garry did not wait for his dismissal, but made his way to the smoking-car as soon as she was ensconced in her seat, leaving her to her own thoughts.

They were destined to be interrupted, however,

for she had scarcely opened a book, only to close it again and turn toward the window, when a tall, spare figure arose precipitately and came down the aisle toward her.

"Susanna, my dear child! I have written and wired you to the Circle Six, but got no reply, and I thought something must have happened to you! Where have you been?"

"Uncle Dave!" she grasped the hand of David Hartwell with a little cry of joy. "Oh, it is good to see you! You haven't been in Fort Worth? I spent the night with your sister."

"No, I'm coming through from Dallas." The attorney seated himself thoughtfully opposite and for a moment tugged at his heavy grizzled mustache. "You didn't tell me last week that you expected to leave the ranch."

There was reproach and a veiled repression in his tone and Susanna glanced at him quickly.

"I didn't know it myself when I saw you," she explained. "I went away the morning after I returned to the Circle Six and waited over in Mammon City to see you, but you had left town yourself. I had a time to get the money together for my trip without you there to sign checks and things!"

"And where have you been?" he asked again.

"To New York." Susanna smiled at his amaze-

ment, but her face sobered quickly. "Uncle Dave, you haven't been in communication with Lee and Sylvia, have you? You see, they don't know where I went, and I—I let them think that it was through your advice, on a matter of business connected with those notes which the bank holds."

"Then you don't know!" Amazement had given place to concern. "But he said—he gave me to understand that he was practically acting in your behalf! I rejoiced, my child, that you had succeeded in interesting Eastern capital——"

"He?—Who?" Susanna interrupted. "What are you talking about, Uncle Dave?"

"A man calling himself Dacon Acheson; he said he and his family had been paying you a visit at the Circle Six, and he knew all about your financial difficulties. I inferred that you had taken him fully into your confidence—Susanna! What is the matter?"

The girl's face had paled, but a brilliant spot of color flamed suddenly in each cheek and her eyes flashed.

"What has he done?" she countered. "Why did he go to you and discuss our affairs? What pretext had he?"

"He has taken over the notes from the bank," David Hartwell replied slowly. "He owns all the outstanding obligations of the Circle Six."

For a moment there was silence and then Susanna brought her small fist down sharply upon the arm of the seat.

"Uncle Dave, this means the end! Ten days of the thirty which were extended on the notes have passed and Acheson will show no mercy! He and his people did stay at the ranch for a few days a fortnight ago, but they were not urged to remain longer, and he tried his best to buy the Circle Six from Lee—he offered a hundred and twenty-five thousand for it and said that the matter could stand open for thirty days. He must have been very anxious to make sure that the ranch would pass into his hands!"

Her tone was bitter and the old attorney demanded:

"But why didn't you let me know this at once, Susanna? That you had received this offer, I mean. Why did you go to New York without taking me into your confidence? Did you hear of someone there who might have taken up the notes and given you a further extension on them?"

Susanna shook her head.

"No, Uncle Dave. I thought I was doing the best, the only thing under the circumstances, but —but now I——"

She broke off and looked out of the window and

David Hartwell patted her hand in fatherly fashion.

"Never mind, my child. We've got to work fast, but we'll find out why Acheson wants the Circle Six so bad, and then maybe we can locate others that'll want it even more than he does. He's bought the deal, but we're all sitting in, and may God help him if he deals from the bottom!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE BARRED GATE

GARRY appeared at the end of the car as they neared Mammon City and would have withdrawn at sight of Susanna's companion, but she beckoned to him.

"This is a friend of Lee's, Uncle Dave, Mr. Garrison Chanler.—Our attorney, Mr. Hartwell." She presented them. "I have been learning some interesting things about our mutual acquaintance, Dacon Acheson."

"You know him, sir?" The attorney eyed Garry keenly. "What is his line? We understand that he is a capitalist from the East."

"Mines and railroads, for the most part, Mr. Hartwell." Garry turned to Susanna. "He and Pete Bigelow's father have been at each other's throats for the past twenty years, but lately they have decided to bury the hatchet. Has he been interesting himself in anything down this way?"

"It would seem so," David Hartwell replied dryly. " 'Mines and railroads,' you say? Humph! There's lot of ground to be broken for both of

them, I reckon, in these parts.—Susanna, I'll look into this and mosey out to the Circle Six as soon as I can round up any information. Take care of yourself as well as Lee and Sylvia, my child; you look as though you needed it!"

He shook hands, bowed gravely to Garry and strode back to his own seat to gather up his old-fashioned luggage. When they alighted at the station he was already striding up the main street of the town, his broad-brimmed hat set well back upon his grizzled hair and the long, black tails of his coat flapping in the breeze.

The little way train was puffing on the side track to take them upon the last lap of their journey, and as they entered the car more than one Dexter friend looked up to nod and smile at Susanna and glance in surprise at her companion. She made an almost imperceptible gesture for him to seat himself beside her and when he obeyed she began a gay little conversation, obviously intended for their neighbors' ears.

Garry understood and did his best to play up, but in spite of their efforts a silence lapsed between them. Every jolt of the train had become torture to him and each revolution of the wheels carried her nearer and nearer to the scene she had come to loathe in anticipation.

It had been all but crowded from her thoughts,

however, by Uncle Dave Hartwell's news, and the utter hopelessness of the situation well-nigh overwhelmed her. With Dacon Acheson holding the whip hand and only twenty days left in which to prevent the ranch from falling into his possession, the girl could see nothing but defeat ahead, and yet her courage rose to meet the blow. Sylvia was only a child, and Lee injured and helpless, and while Wes Hayward and the boys were loyal to the core there was nothing that they could do in this crisis. Uncle Dave had used every resource at his command to gain extensions on the notes for her and now his efforts were exhausted. The Circle Six would not pass into alien hands without a fight, but Susanna realized that the fight must be hers alone.

Where was Dacon Acheson himself? If he had elected to remain in Mammon City until the date when the notes could be called in, Uncle Dave would soon learn it, but Susanna did not think it likely; he must have too large interests in widely scattered sections of the country to wait about for a whole month in order to take personal possession of a mere cattle ranch, when agents could as easily transact that business for him. Then, too, he would scarcely care to meet the attorney for its present owners again until the time arrived for him to come out in the open. That he would

stop at nothing then to achieve his ends the girl realized, but surely there could be no further trouble from him for twenty days.

It was then that a hastily checked remark of Pete Bigelow, temporarily forgotten in the bustle of leave-taking at St. Louis, returned to Susanna's mind. He had heard Dexter spoken of in the conference at Pittsburgh in connection with some "new activities." But what new activities could spring up about a little cow-town which had long since reached the apex of its growth, and what could have brought its very existence on the map to the attention of that august body of magnates? More than all, why had Pete himself halted and looked so thoroughly uncomfortable after mentioning it, as though he had betrayed a secret?

Garry had glanced at her hesitatingly more than once, but she was so lost in the problem confronting her that she seemed scarcely aware of his presence, and he would not intrude upon her thoughts, nor ask a confidence which she withheld. None the less, he wondered mightily what she had learned of "Dynamo" Acheson from her attorney. What mischief had the old fox been up to?

While each was perplexed with vain questions the train drew up before the platform at Dexter, and they had reached their journey's end.

"Howdy!" A rough hand grasped Garry's.

"Mighty glad you come back.—Howdy, Miss Sue!"

It was a puncher from the Bar D, and although he had greeted Garry with hearty warmth, Susanna fancied there was a certain constraint in his manner toward her.

"Is everything all right at the Circle Six, Roddy?" she asked anxiously.

"Lee's doin' fine!" His tone was reassuring, but he looked past her. "Seen Wes down here Wednesday, and he says Lee will soon be hoppin' 'round right smart on a cane.—Reckon I better mosey 'long for the mail."

He hurried off to the little ramshackle post office and Susanna, who knew that the letters would not be sorted for another half-hour, gazed after him for a moment in troubled questioning. Then she turned to her companion.

"We must find Fred and his jitney——" she began, and stopped. Garry was shaking hands violently with a young man in rough, cowpuncher's clothes, whose upturned nose, pugnacious jaw and red-brown curling hair were vaguely familiar, but Susanna could not at first place him in her mind. She did recognize the team and buckboard, however, which stood beside the platform; had Wes taken on a new hand at the ranch?

The young man turned somewhat sheepishly from Garry to her, and as he advanced she stiffened suddenly. It was Acheson's chauffeur, Bill Briggs!

"I—I guess you didn't expect to see me, miss," he stammered, red-faced. "I'm workin' for you, now. Wes took me on an' your brother said I could stay till you came back, anyway. I hope I'll give satisfaction."

His words were still the subservient ones of the town-bred chauffeur, but there was a new independence in his manner, and he looked frankly into her eyes.

"You have left Mr. Acheson's service?" Susanna asked slowly but with meaning.

"Quit him cold, the big stiff!" Bill growled. "Sounds rotten, miss, but he'd already shipped the missus an' the young lady home by train, an' he ordered me to follow when he found I wouldn't do his dirty work for him. I ain't a squealer an' I wouldn't double-cross him if he was on the level, but—well, I'm stuck on it out here, an' I remembered that Wes promised me a job sometime, so I hopped off the cars at Fort Worth an' beat it back to the Circle Six."

Susanna had not taken her eyes off his face, and he did not lower his, although he flushed still deeper beneath her searching scrutiny. It was

evident that he tried to convey more than he said and his tones rang with unmistakable sincerity. Susanna held out her hand.

"I am glad you did, Bill. I haven't forgotten how you helped me with my brother, and I'm sure you'll make good with us."

It was a covenant and his eyes shone as he took her hand.

"Just you watch my smoke, miss!—I—I mean, try me and see. Wes sent me down for the mail to see if there was a letter from you, but I guess I don't need to wait for it now!"

"I'll sit beside you on the front seat," Susanna announced. "Mr. Chanler is coming to pay us a visit, Bill."

"Yes, miss." He was again the well-trained chauffeur and turned to take the bags from Garry, but the latter had already piled them into the buckboard, and now as Susanna took her seat and invited him with a gesture he clambered in behind and they were off.

"One of the Bar D boys told me just now that my brother was getting well fast," Susanna remarked. "Has there been any further trouble with Jake Brower and his gang or have they been run off the range?"

Bill hesitated and the team leaped forward under the involuntarily tightened reins.

"They're not gone, miss," he said at last. "They 've made it pretty hot for us, but they've been layin' low for the last couple of days an' the posse that's after 'em can't find where they hang out. Link Dole an' Clint Beckett are out now with the sheriff's bunch, an' I'm goin' to take my turn to-night."

"Oh, why doesn't Big Matt do something!" the girl cried. "He's rounded up or driven off the range quicker than this every bad man or gang of rustlers since he's been in office!"

"Big Matt's laid up. They got him through the side an' croaked two of his deputies last week, an' Sim Moser's in charge now.—I ain't got no use for that guy!" Bill's face darkened. "I'm what the fellers out here call a tenderfoot, but I know a crook when I see one, an' I wouldn't trust him with a plugged nickel!"

"I'm sorry about Big Matt; I hope he isn't badly hurt." They were approaching the ranch house and Susanna's tone was absent as she strained her eyes hungrily ahead. "Why—why the gates are closed!"

"Barred," Bill replied briefly as he drew up and climbed down over the wheel. "I guess that feller from the Bar D didn't want to scare you, miss, but all their boys that can be spared are in the

posse, an' most of those from the other ranches around. We're expectin' trouble."

"Is it safe for Miss Poindexter to be here, Bill?" Garry spoke for the first time. He had always addressed the Acheson chauffeur as "Briggs," and the latter's eyes sparkled at this recognition of his changed status.

"I guess so, with all of us to take care of her, Mr. Chanler!" he responded heartily. "Here comes Wes now to open the gates!"

The foreman appeared on a shambling run, with Tad Mason at his heels, and when the gate swung back the team leaped forward, to stop with a jerk before the porch steps.

"It's shore good medicine to lay eyes on you, Miss Sue!" Wes spat with gusto as he accepted the hand which she held out to each. "We ain't had what you might call an easy-go since you be'n away an' it looks like we was goin' to have more trouble.—Howdy, Mr. Chanler. You back in Dexter? I didn't hear——"

"Mr. Chanler came on the same train that brought me and he's going to visit us here at the ranch, Wes," Susanna interposed quickly, and turned to Garry. "Don't you want to go in and say 'hello' to Lee?—No explanations yet. He knows nothing."

She added the last in an undertone and Garry nodded.

"I quite understand." Then he raised his voice slightly. "Your sister——?"

"Where is Sylvia?" Susanna turned once more to the foreman.

"Visitin' at the Bentley ranch. Harold's home from England an' his mother sent him over to ask her," he responded. "She didn't want to go and leave Lee sick, but he made her; the little gal's be'n a handful, wantin' to jump the corral all the time an' we never knowin' whether some o' Jake's outfit wouldn't mebbe waylay her on the road. Harold Bentley says they'll keep her safe till the trouble has blown over."

"It is too bad to have brought you here at such a time——" Susanna spoke hesitatingly to Garry, but he interrupted her.

"I am very glad," he said with emphasis. "I shall hope to see Miss Sylvia when she returns, of course, but, meantime, I am happy to join the garrison here. You appear to be in a state of siege?"

Wes flushed.

"First time the gates of the Circle Six was barred!" he declared defensively. "But they got Big Matt an' killed two o' his dep'ties in broad daylight an' I'm takin' no chances."

"Let me know when you need me." Garry nodded and disappeared into the house and Bill Briggs remarked admiringly:

" 'Snipes,' his pals call him back in New York. He got that name over in France; one of the best sharpshooters with his division."

"Mebbe we can give him a chance to prove it out here." Wes' face was very grave.

"I can't understand Jake's daring." Susanna shook her head. "It means worse than jail for him now if he's caught, and he's bound to be in the long run."

"Wes got the ornery dawg through the lungs; the one that plugged Big Matt," Tad volunteered. "He didn't have time to talk none, but though he was with Jake's bunch, all right, he didn't belong in these parts, an' he warn't no greaser, neither."

The significance in his tone made the girl eye him sharply.

"What do you mean, Tad? What sort of a man was he?"

"Nothin' bred on the range, Miss Sue. We calc'late he come from a bigger town than Dexter, an' Bill says——" he hesitated.

"That's right," affirmed the ex-chauffeur from the buckboard as he gathered up the reins. "We found some coke an' a blackjack in his kick when we frisked him after he croaked, an' I'm wise to

his kind; you can hire 'em in any big burg to bump off a guy for a century, an' he didn't belong to this gang any more than—than the crook who sent him here!"

"What does he mean?" Susanna asked in a low tone when the buckboard had driven off.

"He's four-square, Bill is," Wes replied reflectively. "He's got an idee, though, that somebody's kind o' hornin' in on this little party, an' I dunno but he's right. We're fightin' somethin' bigger'n a rustler's gang, Miss Sue."

CHAPTER XVIII

EAST IS WEST

SUSANNA lay in her own familiar bed that night, staring wide-eyed into the darkness. The journey was over and she had brought back her man, but how different was the homecoming from that which she imagined when, in the first white heat of her wrath she had formed her resolution! They had returned to face a new condition of things and Lee was obviously so glad to see Garrison Chanler and so relieved by his presence in the crisis that she had not enlightened him as to the reason for their guest's supposed visit. There would be time enough, she told herself when Sylvia returned.

Wes, too, had been frankly glad of his counsel and Susanna marveled at the way in which, with no seeming effort on his part, he had won the confidence and liking of the wary, taciturn foreman. Yet if she did not know the truth, if that hour in Sylvia's room had never been, would she not, too, have unquestionaly trusted and believed in him?

She tossed restlessly as though in a physical

effort to banish the disquieting thought, and all at once something tinkled against the upper sash of her opened window. Susanna raised herself on one elbow and listened, but the sound was not repeated and she was just dropping off to sleep when a small object bounded over the sill and fell with a soft thud on the floor.

Springing up the girl lighted her lamp and found at her feet a dingy piece of paper wrapped about a handful of pebbles. Wondering, she spread the torn scrap out beneath the lamp and read in a straggling, illiterate hand:

"Señorita. Come out and tell no one. I bring news. ROSA."

Rosa! Could it be the del Rio girl? No one else of whom she could think would address her in Spanish, and yet, save when Montana Dan had shot up the town and they worked together to relieve the injured, Susanna had never exchanged a word with her. The Mexican woman had been the acknowledged sweetheart of Feliciano Mesega, and he was one of Jake's henchmen. Could this be a trap of some sort? Had the rustlers even now closed in on the ranch?

Susanna extinguished her lamp hastily and stood lost in thought. She knew that those of the

outfit who were not out with the posse were patrolling the range, and it might be that the woman alone had eluded them to bring a bona-fide message. The gossip of the town had it that Mesega had thrown her over and she might in a spirit of revenge have come with news of vital importance. Could Susanna afford to disregard the message because of the risk involved?

Her decision was quickly made. Catching up a long, dark cloak to conceal her night-robe, she took from a drawer the revolver whose mate had been left in the débris of the wrecked train and passed like a shadow from the room.

A low light burned in the gallery and by its aid she made her way to the front door, fumbled for a moment with the lock and bolts, and then slipped noiselessly out on the porch. No one was visible, but in the shadow cast by a clump of mesquite by the rail, against the lesser darkness of the starlit night, a deeper shadow moved, and advancing to the steps Susanna crouched half behind the post and called in a low, clear tone:

"I am here. Who wants me?"

"I, señorita!" The answer came like the sibilant hiss of a snake, and like a snake something writhed cautiously over the ground toward her. "Your men, they shoot to keel eef anyt'ing move, but I am your frien', I come!"

The face of Rosa del Rio, strangely pale in the eerie light, was lifted close to her feet and Susanna stooped.

"What is it? What have you come to tell me?"

"Feliciano, he return to me. The señorita knows about Feliciano and me? I have lofe him, but I hate now, and when I hate I pay!" The dark face was contorted with sudden passion and the splendid eyes flashed. "I take heem back, I kiss him, that I may learn the truth of what they plan, he and hees frien's, and then I tell, and they die, all! But no one weel leesten, they theenk steel I lofe him! Only the señorita, she weel believe and be warned, for she, too, ees a woman, and she know when hate comes een the heart!"

In spite of herself Susanna shuddered at the venom in the other's whispered words, but she replied steadily:

"I know, Rosa, and I will believe. What have you come to warn me about?"

"The raid! Eet comes before the dawn! Jake and hees men, and those others who come weeth mucho gold to join them! To-night the posse rides far on a blind trail and Jake's men, they come!"

"Come here?" Susanna breathed. She could scarcely believe her ears, yet the woman's low tones were filled with passionate sincerity.

"Where else? They come to burn and keel, señorita, and when the posse returns the cattle and the horses are driven off, the rancho ees ashes and the señorita and her people are dead! I tried to warn the señorita before, but she was not here. I knew what was to be, and twice they could have been taken like wolves in a trap, but steel the señorita did not return. Onlee thees day I learn that the raid ees set for to-night and I could not come before the dark. Eef the señorita's men do not keel Feliciano he weel know who tell, and then—!" She drew her hand across her throat with an expressive gesture and shrugged. "I am ready. Life, eet has not been of gr-reat kindness to Rosa del Rio, but the señorita shall not die. Remember, they come before the dawn!"

Before Susanna could speak she turned swiftly, crept to the clump of mesquite and then rising darted toward the low trees at the gate. Susanna strained her eyes until the flitting figure was swallowed up in the darkness, then she turned and sped indoors, straight to Garry's room.

He heard the soft, insistent knocking and, springing up, flung open the door.

"Miss Poindexter! Is anything wrong?"

"A raid!" she cried, but in a subdued tone. "Don't let Lee know yet, for he is helpless. A Mexican woman whom I can trust has just brought

me warning that Jake and his outfit have led the posse off on a false trail and are coming before dawn to burn the ranch and kill us all. I—I am sorry to have brought you here to face this, Mr. Chanler, but——"

"I would rather be here at this moment than anywhere in the world!" His face was a mere blur in the darkness before her, but Susanna heard again that note which had thrilled in his tones when she had lain, as he thought, unconscious. "I am at your service now, as always. The men, are any of them left in the bunk-house? Wes was to come for me at twelve to take my turn patrolling the range but every minute counts."

"I don't know. I will run out there and see—" Susanna turned, but a hand reached out of the gloom and grasped her arm.

"You will stay here!" It was the first time in all her life that a command had been issued to her in such a tone, and although she gasped, Susanna did not resent it. "Go to your room and dress and then bring whatever guns and loops of cartridges you have in the house to the living-room. If I dared ask you to make a break for it, I'd try to get you through to the next ranch, but I know you wouldn't leave your brother, so we'll have to make a stand. If I shouldn't return from the bunk-house in five minutes, go out on the back

steps and fire a shot straight in the air. That will bring in the boys, and if Jake Brower and his outfit are near enough to hear they'll think your crowd fired at random."

"If you—don't return," Susanna repeated dully.

"In five minutes," he said in haste. "I may find it necessary to reconnoiter a bit and we can't lose any time getting the boys together. Hurry, please!"

Susanna turned and stumbled off to her own room, from which she presently emerged fully dressed. Lee's revolver and rifle were in his room and she opened the door softly, so as not to disturb him, but his voice spoke quietly from the darkness.

"Sue, when Wes comes, get him to move me out to the living-room. He can put me on that couch under the west window and if they come I'll be as good as the next one."

"Lee! You heard?"

"The wind blew my door open. I should have sent you away when you came home this afternoon, but I didn't think they'd dare a raid!"

"Do you think I would have gone?" Susanna demanded. "We'll be ready for them, Lee, but I don't think you ought to be moved. They'll never get as far as the house——"

"If you weren't here, I'd hope that they would!" the boy retorted grimly. "I want a shot at Jake, myself. I called to Chanler when he ran past my door just now, but he didn't hear. Mind you tell Wes!"

Susanna promised, and taking his rifle and cartridges, she left the room. Had it been five minutes since Garry left the house? It seemed already that hours had passed since she stood talking to him at his door. What had he meant about not returning? It was only a few rods to the bunk-house and he could not have feared that the house was already surrounded!

Placing the rifle and cartridges on the table, she felt to see if her belt and holster were safe, and then stole out upon the back porch. The low light of a single lantern glowed from the bunk-house and a little sob of thankfulness welled up from her heart. He had reached whoever had been sleeping there! While she stood with her eyes fixed upon that pin-point of light, there came a slight commotion from the corral, the creak of the gate, and then a thud of hoofs on the soft ground. Someone had gone to call in those who were riding the range. There was another halt at the ranch gates and then the hoofs drummed out upon the road to die away in the distance. Two horses had gone instead of one; that would

mean that the patrol was scattered, yet both had seemed to be going in the same direction! Then the light in the bunk-house winked out and a man appeared on the run.

"Tad!" Susanna called guardedly, as he approached.

"It's me, Miss Sue!" Tad took the steps at one jump. "Wes an' the boys'll be here soon's Clint kin round 'em up. Don't you worry! When the showdown comes we'll take keer o' you an' Lee an' the ranch! I'm shore glad Jake's got up grit to fight it out, even if he did opine he was goin' to take us by surprise!"

"Who rode with Clint?" Susanna demanded sharply.

"Nobody. Him an' me was the onliest ones in the bunk-house; the rest are all ridin' with the posse or watchin' for Jake," Tad replied.

"Then where's Mr. Chanler? Two horses left the corral!"

"Oh, him? I plumb forgot." Tad showed symptoms of embarrassment. "He tol' me to tell you he'd be back before the fun started. You see, Miss Sue, when Clint rounds up Wes an' the boys there'll only be eight of us an' if Jake comes with all his outfit, includin' them strange hombres that've jined up with him, there'll be more'n twenty, an' so—so——"

"Go on." Susanna's tone was level but her breath came in a convulsive gasp.

"So Mr. Chanler, he reckoned we better git some boys from the Bar D, them that ain't out with the posse theirselves. He aims to git thar an' back in a couple of hours."

The Bar D! He had ridden alone for help! Susanna closed her eyes and one hand went to her throat as she swayed slightly, but Tad was not aware of her emotion.

"He had ought to make it, with luck, for he's got Sure-fire under him an' that hoss can run, if he is plumb wicked. But it's between here'n the Bar D that Jake's outfit's be'n showin' up lately. The posse would've rid out that a'way to-night, only Sim Moser got word they was hidin' out up towards the Triangle Four."

"All right." She could barely articulate the words. "Go in to Lee, Tad. He wants you."

When the puncher had disappeared within, Susanna sank down upon the steps and raised her eyes to the cold stars. As suddenly, as irrevocably as the knowledge had come to Garry, had it been given her to look into her own heart and what she saw there exalted even as it dismayed her. She loved him! No matter what he had done, no matter that the shadow of Sylvia and the injury he had done her should stand forever

between them. He had said that he would care "while East was East and West was West," but East *was* West, all one, when a man and a woman loved each other, however hopelessly, and Susanna knew that Garry did not ride alone upon his hazardous road, for her heart went with him.

CHAPTER XIX

FOR THE CIRCLE SIX

"THEY won't try for the gates, savvyin' that they're barred. I opine they'll cut the wires and come along the crick bed,—that is, if that del Rio girl tol' you the truth, Miss Sue, 'bout Sim leadin' the posse out to'ards the Triangle Four on a blind trail. Wonder who passed the word on to him, anyway, that Jake's outfit was hidin' out some'res 'roun' thar!" Wes remarked.

They were holding a council of war in the living-room, with only the faint glimmer of light from the gallery to reveal their shadowy figures. The foreman, Tad, Link Dole and Clint were ranged about the center table, Lee on a couch drawn up under the side window, and Susanna beside him. Wun See, with his ancient smooth-bore, the only weapon he had ever been induced to touch, resting across his shrunken knees, sat on the back steps, with his mild, inscrutable eyes staring into the night, and down at the great gates old Porcupine, a grizzled veteran of the road, who had drifted in from nowhere five years before, to become a fix-

ture, prowled ceaselessly back and forth on guard.

"The creek bed," Susanna repeated as though to herself. "The Bar D lies beyond it."

"It shore does, and that Chanler hombre was plumb loco to try to make it!" Wes retorted disgustedly. "He's got sand, though, I'll say that for him! If we wasn't so shorthanded as 't is, I'm danged if I wouldn't send a couple o' the boys out for him."

"You don't think he's hurt, that they've got him already?" Lee voiced the question the girl was unable to utter. "We didn't hear any shooting——"

"We did, jus's Clint come up to us," Link drawled. "A couple o' pops an' then a reg'lar volley in answer, an' after that, nothin'! We'd 'a lit out to see what was goin' on, only Wes 'lowed we better git on back yere, Miss Sue bein' alone with jus' Tad an' the Chink, seein' as you was hog-tied."

"I don't shoot with my leg and Jake's attack didn't hurt my trigger finger!" Lee announced grimly. "You did the right thing, of course, and Chanler took a long chance——"

"Oh, you should have gone to help him!" Susanna cried. "You shouldn't have thought of me! I can take care of myself and—and Mr. Chanler was our guest!"

She added the last lamely, aware in the gloom that Link was staring at her, open-mouthed.

"Nobody ast him to go, Miss Sue!" Clint put in defensively. "Mebbe them shots wasn't from him or Jake's gang at all. A lot o' the boys from the other ranches, an' from Dexter, too, are out by theirselves, lookin' for Jake, 'count o' what he done to Big Matt as well as to Lee, an' a couple o' them amachure posses mought 'a met up with each other an' opened fire. It's shore a pity Big Matt got hit, for Sim ain't no 'count; done went an' got hisself lost from his own posse t' other night.—Think Porkypine's awake down at the gate?"

"Reckon he is, an' if we don't want to be caught nappin' our own selves we better quit chawin'." The foreman rose. "It's plumb lucky we got a rifle a-piece an' a couple left over, as well as our guns. Link, you take one an' go into the spare bedroom, it's 'bout the middle o' the west wall, ain't it?"

Susanna nodded.

"It's Mr. Chanler's room."

"Tad, you an' me'll take care o' the windows here each side o' the front door," Wes went on. "Lee can keep a lookout through the west window, but if Jake's outfit follers the crick bed they'll likely come out some'res back o' the bunk-

house an' a few of 'em will stop thar to clean it out, seein's they got the notion they're givin' us a surprise party. The Chink's all right but he's liable to kill hisself with the first shot o' that cannon o' his'n, providin' it goes off a-tall, so Clint better be watchin' out the back entry window. Thet's all. Every one of 'em we git tonight'll save us from wastin' time down to the Mammon City co'tehouse later on!''

He chuckled dryly as he spoke, but each man understood the grim command to account for as many of the raiders as he could before he himself was overwhelmed by force of greater numbers. Link took up his rifle and cartridges and turned without a word toward the gallery, but Clint cleared his throat.

''Wes, if that Chanler hombre does git through to the Bar D thar ain't likely to be more'n five or six o' the boys that kin be rounded up in time, but if one of us was to ride in to Dexter——?''

''Dexter!'' the foreman snorted. ''You gone loco, Clint? Don't you savvy that with all them greasers an' mavericks o' his'n, Jake'll have every road into town covered? He ain't no Mex, he's from Oklahoma, an' he's got jus' 'nough Injun in him to use his head's well as his shootin'-irons. If the raid's on, like the del Rio woman says, there ain't no more chance o' gittin' into

Dexter tonight—hear that? It's come, boys!"

He seized his rifle and, springing for one of the front windows, peered through the loop-hole they had made in the stout shutters, while Tad took his position at the other and Clint ran for his post. A single shot had come from the gate and the high-pitched, quavering cow-boy yell had risen only to be cut short with a choking gurgle.

"That's Porcupine!" Lee exclaimed. "He's down! They've tried the gate, after all!"

"See anything, Tad?" muttered Wes.

"Nary a move, an' thar warn't no tromp o' a bronc, neither!" Tad shifted his position restlessly. "Mebbe ole Porkypine fired accidental-like. It's shore funny——!"

An ear-splitting roar from the back porch silenced him, followed by the thud of a falling body, and then a wild scramble and Clint called:

"That's the Chink! She kicked an' slammed him cl'ar up against the wall, but he's up—— Jumpin' Snakes! Here they come!"

His rifle spoke and a scattered volley replied to it, then silence ensued. Plainly the attacking forces had counted on surprise and were momentarily disconcerted by their reception.

"Think they're closing in from both front and back, Wes?" demanded Lee.

"No. One of 'em must 'a sneaked 'roun' to

the gate for a blind an' picked off ole Porkypine; got him with a knife, mebbe, for thar warn't no shot but his'n.—Tad, you stay here, I'm goin' to Clint!"

"I'll take your window, Wes." Sue had stepped quietly forward, rifle in hand. "That door will hold for awhile if they rush it, but when it goes down I know what to do."

Wes tried to speak but an unintelligible growl was the only sound which issued from his throat as he patted her shoulder hastily and then sprang to the door leading into the entry. At that moment a shot echoed from the bedroom, followed by a wild yell of pain from outside and a snarl of satisfaction in Link's nasal tones.

"That's one, anyway!" Lee tried to raise himself higher on the couch. "God, if I could only stand!—Sue, be careful! If a bullet comes through those shutters——!"

"I'm all right." Susanna's tone was cool and steady. "Tad, to your right! Something moved under that bush——"

A chorus of hideous yells drowned her voice, and the thud of many running feet on soft ground from the rear was in turn lost in a crackle of rifle fire that quickened into a rattling roar. It was punctuated by the bang of the smooth-bore and

a sharp tattoo from those guarding the rear, but the ping of bullets and shattering of glass showed that the raiders were well within range and had found their mark.

Tad darted a longing glance over his shoulder and Sue exclaimed:

"Go to them, Tad! With Lee and Link guarding the sides, I can hold the front alone!"

He needed no second bidding and as he leaped through the entry door a thin wail rose in a Celestial voice, followed by high-pitched, furious chatter, and he called back:

"They've fired the cook-house an' Wun See's gone loco!"

The ear-splitting din continued for what seemed an interminable space, then gave place once more to sporadic firing which diminished to silence, and Wes reappeared for an instant in the doorway.

"All right?" he demanded anxiously. "None of 'em got 'roun' the house, did they?"

"There are no signs of them," Lee responded. "Anyone hit, back there?"

"Not the boys, but the Chink's done for! The danged fool dropped his gun when they fired the cook-house, and charged 'em single-handed! Last I seen of him when their rifles spit they was two-three on top of him. They're holdin' off now for

a spell but the next time they come on—!" He hesitated, glancing at Susanna, but she nodded understandingly.

"They'll come for the finish," she said shortly, adding: "Hear the horses in the corral! They've scented the smoke.—Wes, the light's getting brighter!"

The foreman glanced back and Clint called:

"Bunk-house is a-goin', an' the wind is this way!"

Lee groaned.

"If the house catches we're done for! Wes, how many of them are there?"

"Looked to be a heap over twenty, what I could see from the glare o' the cook-shack. They was yowlin' 'round it like a pack o' Injuns; biggest gang in these parts for twenty year!—I don't like this quiet, they're up to some devilment!"

He turned abruptly and disappeared and Lee raised his haggard eyes to meet Susanna's calm ones.

"Sue, if they get in to close quarters, it's the end! God, why did you have to reach home just to-day! If you'd only waited——!"

"Watch that window!" Sue interrupted. "This is the time between advances when they'll try to slip around the house. They used poor

judgment when they started the fire, for it makes everything as light as day."

The front yard was indeed luridly illumined by the glare from the blazing bunk-house and the smoke, carried swiftly on the wind, bore an occasional burst of sparks which made the girl's heart contract with dismay. It could be only a question of time, minutes perhaps, before the roof above them would catch and to venture above to extinguish any incipient blaze would mean to become a human target for the rifles of the marauders.

In the weird light the clumps of mesquite and low trees stood out in bold relief and cast distorted shadows, and when the swirling smoke lifted Susanna could distinguish two shapeless, huddled forms by the gate. If Porcupine were dead, he had at least taken his assailant with him.

Had Garrison Chanler reached the Bar D in safety? In spite of the shots, which Link Dole had heard, in spite of the fact that Jake's outfit must have crossed the road to descend to the bed of the creek at approximately the time of the solitary rider's passing, Susanna clung desperately to her forlorn hope. Airplane crash and train-wreck had spared him; surely he was not to die at the hands of a band of cattle thieves! He would

win through, he must! In placing a barrier between them which would be forever insurmountable, fate had played a sorry enough jest; it could not be ordained that it was to be capped by a tragedy!

If only her straining eyes could pierce the night, even to the far reaches of that road, and see how he fared! Had he been unmolested he should before now have been raising the alarm at the Bar D. Was he alive, unscathed, or perhaps lying beneath the body of Sure-fire——?

Susanna covered her eyes for an instant. Dear God, that he might be safe! As the prayer welled up from her bursting heart she knew, as in a revealing flash, that the man for whom she begged mercy had done no wrong! Somehow, in some inexplicable way, Sylvia had lied, or she herself had taken the younger girl's accusation too seriously. Garry was innocent, and in her soul she must have known it from the first moment when they stood face to face. But she would not see, she would not believe! Now, by an instinct surer than logic or proof, the truth came home to her, bringing peace to her troubled spirit, and with it a rising tide of hope which could not be stemmed.

Surely death could not take him now! He must live to know that she believed in him at last, even

though he could never guess that it was love which had brought realization of the truth.

There came a sudden movement from the couch and Lee's revolver barked twice. Susanna whipped hers from her holster, dropping her rifle and leaned closer to the loop-hole just as a figure, bent almost double, hurtled around the corner of the house and fell writhing before the porch. Was it a trick, or had Lee actually wounded him? While Susanna hesitated the man raised himself on one elbow and the reflection from the mounting flames flared full upon his face as he slowly lifted a revolver and aimed it seemingly straight toward her. Before she could fire, however, his arm wavered and dropped and he sank back to lie motionless, the smoke curling about him as from a bier.

It was Felix Mesega, the "Feliciano" whose vengeance Rosa had feared! There could be no mistaking that evil face, distorted even in the agony of death with malign passion. Life which had not been "of great kindness" to the Mexican girl, had spared her from the consequences of her own act; would it spare Garrison Chanler, that he might return and learn he had not been misjudged to the end?—But would Susanna herself be there to tell him if he came?

As though in answer to the unspoken question, the two rifles cracked again at the rear of the house, followed by that of Link Dole, as a heavy detonation and the sound of rending wood came from the bedroom. At the same instant Lee fired again and Susanna crouched low beneath the sill of her window.

No shot had come from the raiders at this onslaught, and the roar of the flames seemed to mount higher as the dense curtain of turgid smoke billowed before the loop-hole in the shutter. When it lifted, the girl saw a figure creeping cautiously along the porch floor toward the front door and another crawling up the steps. This time she did not hesitate and at her first shot the creeping figure sprawled inert. With the second the man on the steps rose and fled, lurching, toward the mesquite bush, only to stagger and fall midway.

The rifles had been discarded and from three sides of the house revolvers kept up a volley as quickly as they could be reloaded, when above the din there came a howl in Tad's enraged voice and a warning shout from Wes, to be drowned in a heavy thud which shook the house.

"A battering-ram!" Lee's face whitened. "Sue dear, it's no use! They're breaking down the back door! I—I can't save you——!"

"Listen!" She flung up one hand, but the guns which were answering now from the raiders silenced all lesser sounds.

"What is it! What did you hear?" Lee had reloaded his revolver and paused, looking up at her.

"Horses! The gallop of hoofs on the road!"

"You're dreaming, Sue! You're beside yourself!" He read her thoughts. "Chanler never got through, dear; there wasn't a chance for him!"

"He did!" Her voice rose to an exultant cry. "Don't you hear them coming? It isn't the posse, they're away off in the other direction! Listen, Lee! Listen!"

And this time he did hear, high above the roar of fire and crash of shot the rhythmic clatter of many horses on the hard-packed road and the distant but piercing yip-yeouw of the punchers' battle-cry.

Lee's revolver clattered to the floor and he sank back upon the couch with a boyish sob of relief, only to start up in swift horror.

"Sue, what are you doing! God, are you mad?" For Sue had unlocked the front door and was tugging wildly at the bolts.

"The gates! The gates are barred!" she cried. "I'm going to open them, Lee!"

"You can't! It's certain death to try, Sue; you'd never reach them!" he exclaimed. "Sue, for God's sake——!"

"I must!" the girl replied through set teeth as another jarring blow struck the rear door. "They'll break through in a minute and it would be all over while the boys were trying to batter down the gates! I'm going to drag your couch over to the front window, Lee, and you must cover my going as well as you can."

The bolts shot back with a clang and Susanna pushed the couch over beneath the window, then picked up Lee's revolver and restored it to him.

"Wes! Tad! Stop her!" The agonized cry rose from Lee's throat, but a fusillade of shots was his only answer. "Sue, you'll be shot down before you've gone ten steps! For God's sake listen to me!"

"I can't, dear. It's the only chance!" In a momentary cessation of noise the hoof-beats rang nearer and she stooped and dropped a swift kiss upon the boy's forehead, then, revolver in hand, opened the door and slipped out.

The smoke, which had been suffocating in the room, cleared in a gust of clean air, then dropped again like a blanket, but not before Susanna had seen the three dead figures almost at her feet and a fourth living one skulking around the unpro-

tected east corner of the house. A bullet sang past her ear and she fired blindly in the direction from whence it had come, then turned and ran for the gates. The horses of the rescuers had pulled up before them with a mighty clatter and a hubbub of mingled shouts and execrations arose as they found their way barred.

"Don't shoot, boys! I'm coming!" Susanna thought that her voice had died away in her throat, but a fitful moment of quiet had come and the wind which wrapped her in a smoke-screen had carried her message.

A mingled cheer and groan arose as those beyond the gate recognized at once her pluck and her danger, and an answering yell from the raiders, followed by a renewed outpouring of shot and a third resounding crash of the battering-ram, showed that the arrival of reinforcements for the beleaguered little garrison had been discovered.

Bending low, Susanna sprinted on, but a bullet passed through her sleeve so close to her flesh that it seared her arm and two more sped over her head, while from behind her there came a guttural shout.

Without looking back, she fired over her shoulder. She had almost reached the gates, and surely, surely that was the voice of Garrison Chanler calling out to her! With a panting sob,

she leaped forward, but at that instant her foot touched something bulky and soft and she went down just as two arms like bands of steel caught her from behind and her assailant fell with her.

Susanna still retained her convulsive grip upon her revolver and now she wrenched herself free and brought it down with all her force on the head of her antagonist. A choking gasp came from him and the arms relaxed, while she bounded to her feet. She had lost her bearings in the dense curtain of smoke, but the frenzied pounding and clamor on the gates guided her and in a minute she was fumbling at the heavy bars, straining to lift them.

It seemed a veritable age before they slid back one by one, and with a cry she leaped aside, just as a subdued crash and smashing of wood from the house told that the stout back door had fallen at last, and the gates themselves swung open.

The riders poured through with a ringing cheer, but the foremost of them swerved his great, raw-boned horse, stooped and dragged her yielding body up before him, and Garrison Chanler's voice cried into her dulling ears:

"Well done, Two-gun Sue! My dear! My dear!"

CHAPTER XX

CLEARING SMOKE

SUSANNA awoke with a gurgling gasp and the taste of raw new liquor in her mouth, to find herself lying on an improvised bed on the living-room table, with Doc Rankin, flask in hand, standing over her and Garry just behind him. Upon the other side, white and hollow-eyed but grinning broadly, stood Big Matt Cooley, and friendly faces crowded close, but they were all Dexter folk! Even the telegraph operator from the station, and Jim Holcomb, the postmaster, and Faro Jim. . . .

Susanna closed her eyes, then opened them swiftly and they sought Garry's face.

"Lee! He's safe——?"

"All right, Sue dear!" Her brother's voice called reassuringly.

"And Wes and Tad and the rest of the boys——?" She struggled weakly to sit up.

"Still kickin', Miss Sue, but nicked up, some," Link drawled. He was holding a reddened rag to the side of his head. "I got one maverick but the second shore did brand me! Reckon the Doc'll

hev to fix me out with one o' these here rubber ears I heard tell of!—Not me first, Doc! Wes needs you most."

Clint and Tad, the latter with one arm hanging limp, were supporting between them the foreman's drooping figure, and Susanna held out her hands to Garry, who lifted her from the table.

"Put him here!—Oh, Doc Rankin, he's not——!"

"Shot through the neck, but it missed the jugular. Don't let the blood scare you, Miss Sue!" The doctor was making a hasty but thorough examination. "Clint, you look to be spry enough in spite o' them cuts. Git me some clean sheets an' tear 'em up. Got any way o' heatin' water in the house?"

"The old woodstove is still set up in the back entry." Susanna's strength had returned in a flash and she flew to do his bidding. "If I had some kindling——?"

"They's a-plenty 'roun' the door an' window casings!" Tad grinned faintly.

"I'll help you, Miss Susanna," Garry volunteered, but she paused in the doorway.

"How—how did you get here, Big Matt?" she demanded. "You and—and all of Dexter! I thought you were hurt! Where are the boys from the Bar D?"

"Don't know nothin' 'bout them!" The sheriff responded with a twinkle. "Garry rid in to town awhile back like all hell was after him an' I got well all-fired quick when I heard the news that del Rio girl had brung you!"

"How did you know it was Rosa?" asked Susanna quickly.

"We—we come acrost her later." The sheriff shifted awkwardly from one huge foot to the other. "Doc's a-waitin' for that there hot water, Miss Sue!"

"I—I forgot." She turned hastily, but in the entry as she dropped on her knees before the stove, she raised her eyes to Garry, who had followed her. "I don't know why I fainted again. It was so silly——!"

"It was the bravest, most splendid—" he checked himself. "I didn't go to the Bar D after all, you see. I decided I'd get more of a crowd together at Dexter, and I did. The whole town turned out, to a man!"

"I saw," she nodded. "But Wes said Jake would have every road covered which led there."

"I fancy he had." Garry turned to gather up the broken splinters of woodwork which littered the floor. "I encountered a couple of his men, but they didn't put up a very protracted argument. We got here just in time, though if it hadn't been

for you— Wes must have barred the gates again when they rode in after Clint's warning."

Susanna's eyes darkened.

"Poor old Porcupine!" she murmured. "He was just a derelict when we took him in, but he died game!—and Wun See, too! He lost his head when they fired the cook-house and dashed out straight into their hands——"

A weird chant in a queer, falsetto key interrupted her and in the aperture left by the fallen door appeared a wrinkled yellow face, wreathed with an ecstatic smile, despite the blood and dirt which caked it.

"Wun See!" gasped Susanna.

"Allee same clook man!" he chortled, and they saw that he waved a stained meat cleaver in one claw-like hand and a long, murderous butcher's knife in the other. "Bang-bang no good, klick-ee both ways, knifee say sl-uck! an' Mex'can go dead quick. They gettee clook-house, Wun See gettee them, three!—Lee boy no samee hurt, Mlissie?"

"No, Wun See, he's safe." Susanna repressed a little shiver but her eyes shone. "I'm glad you are, too! Go in there and tell them."

A roar greeted the Chinaman's appearance and when the door had closed behind them, Sue asked:

"What happened after you all rode in? I

know Jake's outfit was driven off, of course, but what became of him? Did anyone see him?"

"I don't know." Garry shook his head. "I brought you in and laid you on the table and then ran back to join the others. There was some pretty stiff fighting for a few minutes, but it turned into a rout and, although we haven't had time yet to go out and look around, I don't think many got away. The bunk-house is just a heap of embers now."

The fire in the stove was roaring briskly and the water in shallow pans upon its top had already commenced to seethe. Susanna, watching it, sighed.

"It's horrible, isn't it? I am not as blood-thirsty as it may seem, Mr. Chanler, but I wish Jake had been accounted for! I shall never feel safe for Lee while he is alive and free to visit further vengeance on him! Lee shot Felix Mesega, the man Rosa hated and feared, did you know. I recognized his face in the light from the burning bunk-house. You met her, the sheriff said?"

Garry hesitated.

"We found her," he amended at length in a lowered tone. "You would have to know sometime, Miss Susanna. She was lying in the ditch,

shot through the heart, where the Dexter road turns into the highway."

"Oh, poor girl!" Susanna cried in real distress. "She said she was ready, that life had not been kind to her, but I shall never forget that, whatever her motive in warning us, we all owe our lives to her!—That must have been the volley of shots which Wes and the others heard when Clint reached them with the warning."

"Water hot, yit, Miss Sue?" Link stuck his bandaged head in the door. "We be'n countin' up what that there op'rator o' the click machine calls casualties. Tad's got a ball through the arm an' Clint's battered up some where the door fell in on him, but that there locoed Chink's shore a lucky cuss; got a knock on the head an' 'nough greaser knife jabs to let daylights out o' a white man, an' he's r'arin' 'roun' real happy an' pleased with hisself, an' sociable as a ole maid at a party!"

"But your head, Link?" Susanna murmured.

He grinned sheepishly.

"I'm shy most o' one ear, but it ain't goin' to harm me none, 'ceptin' to spoil my good looks. The folks you brung from Dexter got off right easy, Mister Chanler; only a few stray shots hit 'em an' no real harm done, at that."

Susanna took up a pan of water and motioned toward the other.

"I'm glad of that," she said. "Come. Thanks to Mr. Chanler, we have all escaped the worst."

She led the way, but as she set the pan down upon the table, ready to the doctor's hand, the front door opened and Bill Briggs appeared. The ex-chauffeur's face was very grim and although he nodded to her, he made straight for the sheriff.

"Got a little news for you, sir," he began. "One of your deputies is lyin' outside, dead. I croaked him."

"You!" Big Matt exclaimed, and a little murmur arose from the townsmen behind him. "All my dep'ties rode with the posse!"

"This one didn't, not for long." Bill gazed frankly from one grave face to another. "He led the whole gang of us off near the Triangle Four and down into that gully by the river. It looked like a place where a bunch like that Jake's would hang out, but I kept my eye on this guy, for he'd got himself lost before, and I was leery of him."

"Not Sim Moser!" ejaculated Wes.

"That's the bird," responded Bill. "Sure enough, he sent us all scoutin' round an' then made a quiet little getaway straight back here to the ranch, with me trailin' him; I drove a taxi once in New York, and I know how. He tied his hoss a little way back where the wires was already cut for him to get through, and when I saw that I

knew I had the right dope, so I followed him. He came sneakin' up on that side of the house,'' Bill jerked a thumb toward the east,—''and when he got close he pulled his handkerchief off his neck and tied it over his face, all but the eyes.''

The murmur among the listeners had changed to excited exclamations, in which there ran an ominous undercurrent, but Bill was unmoved.

''I'm a stranger out here, of course, but if you don't believe me, get one of Jake's gang and put him through the third degree. I'm giving it to you straight. Sim pulled his revolver and crawled up close to that middle window that somebody was pokin' a gun through, and fired. By the flash I saw the guy inside was Link, and the shot sailed by him and splintered the bed-post.''

''It tooken my ear with it,'' Link announced. ''Where was you, Buddy, while Sim was poppin' away at me?''

''Creepin' up on him,'' Bill replied. ''He fired quick the first time, but he didn't get a second chance, for I jumped him. I didn't want to make any noise about it, because I figured his friends knew he was there and somebody'd come to join him, so I—I give him a rap on the conk with the butt of my gun and he went down like a log. I thought he was out for keeps, so I dragged him behind some bushes and tied my handkerchief

over my own face like he'd done and crawled back, and pretty soon one of those spigs come wormin' through the grass toward me and whispered had I got him, meanin' Link here. I got the spig instead, but just then somethin' jumped me from behind and a knife scratched me between the shoulder blades. I hadn't made sure enough of Sim."

"Bill!" Susanna cried.

"It's gospel, boys!" Big Matt had turned Bill around with a hand on his shoulder and they all saw the stained rent in his shirt. "Go on, Bill."

The ex-chauffeur glanced half-apologetically toward Susanna.

"I—I got the knife away from him, and this time I didn't take any chance." He was evidently choosing his words with care. "You'll find him out there under Link's window, and the spig, too."

"Let's go out an' hev a look 'roun' anyways, boys, an' see what-all damage we done to Jake's outfit." The sheriff turned to the others. "If Sim turned yeller like Bill says, it warn't from no likin' for Jake, but because somebody bought him over; the same cuss, whoever he is, that sent them mavericks down from Dallas, or some'eres, to horn in.—Bill, you stay an' let the doc look at that back o' your'n."

"Not me!" laughed Bill. "I got stuck worse than this in more than one scrap with a dago gang in New York, and I want to go along."

Wes's neck had been bandaged and he started up as the rest crowded out, but the doctor held him back, and Lee called from the couch:

"Wait a minute, Chanler! When Sue was running for the gate, two men started around the corner of the house after her. I missed the first but dropped the second, and he yelled out something as he fell. He's lying right under the porch railing, and I have a particular reason for wanting to know what he looks like. Will you tell me?"

"Of course." Garry nodded and went out the door. The Chinaman had disappeared in the direction of the rear and now his high-pitched, sing-song chant arose once more from the entry, accompanied by the rattle of stove-lids and pans.

"Wun See has the right idea," Lee remarked. "If he can find anything left from the ashes of the cook-house, the boys will all be glad of breakfast when they come in; it's almost morning."

A dull light was indeed stealing over the rolling mesquite, the stars had disappeared and faint streaks of pink barred the eastern sky.

"There are bags of coffee and flour in the storeroom, and a barrel of sugar," Susanna remarked.

"Lee, why did you ask about that last man you shot? You don't think it could be——?"

She left her sentence unfinished as Garry re-entered quickly.

"I found your fellow, all right," he announced. "He was a white man, around forty, I should say, with a black beard and an old scar across the upper part of his face. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, and there's a double arrow tattooed on one forearm."

"Jake Brower himself!" cried Susanne. "Lee, you said he was your man, and now you've got him!"

Lee sighed with satisfaction and lay back, but Garry smiled slightly.

"Is that a habit out here?" he asked innocently. "Do you always get your man when you go after him?"

Susanna flamed scarlet.

"I—I'm going to help Wun See!" she declared hurriedly, and turned to the entry door.

"We aim to, Mr. Chanler." It was Wes who replied. "Now that Jake's dead, I reckon I know what Lee's quarrel with him was 'bout an' it's no harm tellin'. No hombre out here kin mistreat a woman, no matter if she is the kind Rosa was, without gittin' called, if there's a reg'lar two-fisted man 'roun'."

"But I thought Mesega——?" began Garry.

"Shore." Wes nodded. "Him an' Jake got in a little argyment down to Dexter one day an' Felix was gettin' the worst end of it when Rosa sailed in to help him, an' Jake started to give her the same, only Lee happened to be moseyin' 'long an' declared hisself in. Nobody ain't never whipped Jake afore, an' he didn't aim to rest ontil he'd got Lee. Ain't that so, son?"

"Reckon it is." Lee smiled faintly. "Rosa repaid me, anyway, last night."

"I calc'late she was plannin' more on gittin' back at Felix." Wes shook his head. "It's like I tol' Miss Sue once, there ain't nothin' a gal, white or Mex, won't do to git square with a hombre that's throwed her down."

Susanna, entering with the huge coffee-pot and a stack of cups and plates on a tray, heard the last remark and her memory carried her swiftly back to the day she found Lee wounded on the range. In speaking of Rosa then and her connection with the probable assailant, Wes had said: "Good or bad, when a feemale gits mad at some pore feller 'cause she cain't put her brand on him there ain't nothin' too ornery for her to accuse him of!"

Sylvia was only a woman, too, and spoiled by the abject adoration of everyone she had known.

What if her accusation of Garry had been only an impetuous outburst of hurt pride and pique?

Susanna had no time to turn the thought over in her mind, for the tramp of many feet sounded on the porch and the sheriff and his men crowded once more into the room. Yet her eyes, with a troubled question in their depths, had sought Garry's face and the sedulous way he avoided her gaze confirmed her suspicion. Could it be that a sister of hers had stooped to so despicable a revenge for a fancied slight?

"Wal, we found one of 'em still breathin', an' he talked some before he died." The sheriff's tone was portentous. "It war an ole friend of our'n, Montana Dan. Seems like he jined up with Jake's outfit after he tried to shoot up the town an' they've be'n rustlin' in three counties. Bill was correct 'bout Sim; the ornery dawg's be'n a pardner o' Jake's right along an' it's him them strange mavericks reported to for Jake's outfit soon's they sneaked into town. He's been givin' 'em fifty a day, 'cordin' to Dan, and he never saw that much in his life afore!—You know Jake's out there drilled through the head?"

Lee nodded.

"But what else did Montana Dan say?" he demanded. "Who were these strangers and where did they come from?"

"Dan didn't get so far as to say that." Big Matt shook his head. "The onliest thing he knows was he come on Sim twicet this week talkin' to a stranger up by Grosscup's Pool, an' once he seen this hombre give Sim a little raw-hide satchel. Dan's dead, an' I'm namin' no names, Lee, but the feller was spindlin' and old and dandified, with grizzled hair an' a little p'inted gray chin-whisker. Kin you call to mind ary stranger 'roun' Dexter lately that deescription would fit?"

Her brother uttered a startled, half-incredulous exclamation, but Susanna scarcely heard. Dacon Acheson! He, the suave Wall Street magnate, had leagued himself with outlaws and gangsters, had descended to murder itself to gain possession of the Circle Six!

CHAPTER XXI

ALADDIN'S LAMP

"LINK git back yet with that new lumber for the bunk house?" Wes asked as Tad came around the corner of the back porch. It was two days later and save for the shiny new door behind them and the two blackened spaces where the outbuildings had stood, no evidences remained of the recent battle.

"No signs of him." Tad seated himself on the lowest step with a wary eye on his bandaged arm. "Feemales is shore strange critters! That there gal that waits on table down to the Eatin' House—the red-headed, freckle-faced one—couldn't see Link for dust afore he got his ear clipped, an' now that he's humlier'n ever, danged if she ain't makin' up to him! Where is ever'body?"

"Clint an' Bill are ridin' line an' Lee's 'bout the only one's you kin put your hands on when you want him!" The foreman's face was a study. "Reckon that's only 'cause he's hog-tied an' cain't move hisself. Miss Sue goes wanderin' 'roun' the

range like she'd lost somethin' an' as for that Chanler hombre——! Tad, there's a-plenty goin' on we cain't figger out noways."

"We figgered out almighty plain what that—Acheson was up to!" Tad growled with a mouth-filling oath.

"Mebbe we did, but we cain't prove it!" retorted Wes. "Montana Dan's dead an' so is Sim, an' their word wouldn't be tooken noways 'gainst his'n, 'cause Miss Sue herself says he's shore some big smoke back where he comes from an' he's got inflooence all through the West. 'Sides, all them strange mavericks in Jake's outfit that wasn't plugged full o' holes vamoosed an' the law cain't tech Acheson without witnesses."

"The law ain't what I got on my mind," Tad observed darkly. "I ain't hankerin' for any more witnesses an' neither is Big Matt, for all he's sheriff, nor the hull o' Dexter. All we ast is to meet up with that ——coyote an' have a rope handy! Then let his inflooence come 'long an' cut him down! Chanler shore proved hisself aces high when he rode alone for help time o' the fight, but if he ain't loco he's up to somethin' now that's mighty cur'us, millin' 'roun' all by hisself where you'd least calc'late to run acrost him, for all the world like Acheson hisself did when he was here. Clint seen him yestiddy down by the crick holdin'

a confab with another strange hombre with a beard an' great big 'roun' specs, an'——"

"An' a surveyor's transit?" demanded Wes suddenly. "When he was here afore Sim told Big Matt he seen him with the same feller out on the line o' the Hundred-an'-Four! Why in time did Miss Sue bring him back, an' what's he doin' here?"

"Why'd he come in the first place?" countered Tad. "He knowed this here Acheson an' they're up to the same tricks, an' if I was Lee——! Here's Link now. Who's he got with him?"

At that precise moment Susanna, seated on a rock in the clump of mesquite beside the spring a good half-mile away heard the branches rustle behind her and turned to find Garry standing there.

"I beg your pardon," he began formally. "I did not know you were here."

Susanna rose precipitately.

"I—I was just going——! But that's not true, of course, and it's silly of us to avoid each other like the plague!" She laughed somewhat shakily, but a sort of desperate earnestness rang in her tones. "I don't suppose it matters to you what I think but—but my sister will be home to-morrow and before she comes there is something that I want you to know."

"Won't you sit down again?" he asked quietly. When she complied he seated himself near and waited, but somehow she found it difficult to begin. "It matters very much to me what you think on—on any subject, but don't tell me if it troubles you."

"It will trouble me if I don't." Susanna hesitated and then plunged. "You see, Mr. Chanler, when I started East to find you I thought you were —I mean, I had formed an opinion of you that I found was not true, in the least, and I——I couldn't understand. Then we started on our return journey and you kept on being a different sort of man entirely than I had supposed and I began to wonder if perhaps I hadn't made a mistake in the very beginning, if I hadn't misunderstood what had been told to me."

"Please, Miss Poindexter!" he exclaimed as she paused. "What does it matter what I am? To-morrow——"

"I want you to know before to-morrow comes that—that I don't believe anything I heard! I haven't believed it, really, from the minute I saw you, but I wouldn't admit even to myself that I was in the wrong. I've been horribly mistaken and unjust and wicked, but I had to tell you! I'm not asking you to forgive me, I can't! It's just that I wanted you to know the truth."

He leaned toward her and his eyes looked as they had the day he came upon her in her little pink gown in the Lindholm orchard.

"Why did you want me to know?" he asked, very low. "Did you care how I felt, knowing what your opinion of me must be? When—when did you let yourself believe——?"

"When you went for help and I thought you had met Jake's outfit, and—and would never come back again." Her own voice had sunk almost to a whisper and her eyes were fixed on the sluggish little stream which meandered between two stones at her feet. "I realized then that it couldn't be true and never had been, and I had to tell you! You had a right to know that—that no one in the world could think anything of you that was not all I would have them think of—of Lee."

She had caught herself up on the last words and Garry watched her, the radiance deepening in his own eyes, but he did not speak, and for a little space silence fell between them. Then he rose.

"This is—fine of you, Miss Poindexter." His tones were quiet, but they trembled slightly. "I can't tell you how I appreciate what you have said, nor what your faith means to me! I can't say anything now, but to-morrow—to-morrow per-

haps it may be that I can tell you something which I, too, have discovered."

Susanna averted her face and, rising also, moved a little away from him.

"I—I must go to Lee now——!" she murmured, but a ringing shout from her companion fell upon her amazed ears and she turned. Garry had fallen upon his knees beside the spring and was tearing frantically at a great flat stone.

"I've got it!" he cried. "I knew it must be here somewhere or that old fox wouldn't have known, and I've searched every foot of the range——"

"What is it?" Susanna exclaimed. "Nobody ever comes to this old spring. It is drying up and the water has been brackish and queer——"

" 'Queer'!" He caught the word from her lips. "Your brother took me into his confidence after the fight and told me the difficulties you've been laboring under and the danger of losing the Circle Six, as well as what you learned from Hartwell on the train, about Acheson taking up the outstanding notes which could be called in in a fortnight. Do you know why he could not wait even that little time, Susanna?—Why he backed Jake Brower's gang to murder you all?"

He was still tugging at the huge stone and neither was conscious in their excitement of the

fact that he had called her by the more familiar name.

"I've tried to puzzle it out, but I couldn't, for the Circle Six is bound to fall into his hands." She laughed ruefully. "Only a miracle could save it, and I haven't a wishing wand or Aladdin's lamp!"

"But you have! You have!—Look!" He had flung the flat stone aside at last and beneath it the pool of water lay still as molten wax, with murky iridescent streaks floating upon its surface. "If you haven't Aladdin's lamp you have that which would keep it alight and potent, that which lights the lamps of the world! It's oil, Susanna!"

"Oil!" she gasped. "Are you sure? Why, we never suspected, never dreamed——!"

"I did!" Garry interrupted. "Not here on your ranch at first, but somewhere in the vicinity. That's what I came to Dexter for in the first place; I'm supposed to be an expert geologist and I've had a rodman down here with me for weeks, staying over at Henshaw's. We wanted to keep the whole thing quiet, you see, so that my partners in Wall Street and I could get hold of the best leases before the rush started, in the event that I struck oil. We've followed the logical course of the line down from the big fields farther north, and I've been looking for outcroppings of sand-

stone or shale or limestone—but you wouldn't know about that. It's here, Susanna, here! Wealth uncounted and the promise of more oozing out of the ground before your eyes!"

"I can't believe it! It seems that I must be dreaming and will wake up any minute to find the old fear hanging over me, the losing fight to take up again!" Susanna the self-contained was laughing and sobbing at once. "Oh, I must tell Lee and Wes——!"

She turned and paused transfixed, for side by side, peering over the clump of mesquite, appeared the kindly, anxious face of David Hartwell and the round, astonished one of the ubiquitous Peter Bigelow.

"Oil! Oil!" Garry cried exultantly. "Susanna's won her fight! We've struck oil on the Circle Six!"

CHAPTER XXII

SUSANNA GETS HER MAN

THE quick-falling dusk was settling down over the ranch and the little group gathered on the front porch were gazing with introspective eyes out over the mesquite toward the gates which once more stood wide. Lee, who had been carried out to the couch to join the others, saw as in a mirage great derricks and cranes cleaving the flat sky-line, and a vast, never-ceasing golden flow like lava from a magic volcano to sweep before it all memory of the gray years; but the vision of the girl beside him, holding his hand tightly in hers, was bigger and more far-seeing. People, the hundreds of all races who would gather there on the range to toil and strive and gain and live out their lives, making of Dexter a greater community than even her father's dreams had pictured before roseate hopes gave place to the apathy of hopeless failure. He had but laid the burden at their feet, and it was theirs now to take up with its added responsibilities and graver duties, to those faithful pioneers who had builded with them and those who would come.

"What are you thinking of?" The elderly attorney, Pete Bigelow and Garry had been talking a little apart, and it was the latter who voiced the question.

"I hardly know how to put it into words," Susanna smiled. "I was thinking of Dexter a year from now, and ten, and twenty! What shall we make of it, we who hold it in our hands to-night? We've seen it grow from wagon-tents to shacks and we're proud of it! It will be a bigger Dexter, of course, but will it be a greater one?"

Pete laughed.

"You'll be a million miles away, Miss Poindexter! You'll forget what a cattle town is like! Paris, London——!"

"I shall be here," Susanna interrupted quietly.

"I think I know what Miss Poindexter means." Garry nodded gravely. "It isn't the immediate result, the material gain, but the changes that will come and the need for directing them, like the course of a stream, that they may enrich and not devastate."

Susanna gave him a grateful glance, but Pete exclaimed.

"You'd have one immediate and material picture of devastation, all right, if you could see old Dynamo Acheson's face when he hears you've

discovered what a Golconda you've been herding cattle on, all these years! Lord, I wish I could be there! When I saw Dad's man in St. Louis and found Dad had wired ahead for him to give me all the inside dope on Acheson's little proposition for a new line down from Fort Worth to this burg, I smelled a rat because of all the secret red tape, and because I knew old Dynamo. I made up my mind I'd run down here and see what he had up his sleeve, but upon my soul I didn't think it was battle, murder, and sudden death! I can't see it right, even yet; he's driven more than one rival house to the wall and been guilty of every sort of sharp practice that could get by in the financial game, but for him to ally himself with brigands and gunmen, and conspire to wipe out a whole family just to gain possession of one problematic oil lease when he has so many other gigantic interests—it's beyond my comprehension!"

"Not if the conspiracy were one of revenge on the part of others and already hatched, needing only support which could be supplied with a minimum risk of detection, and if not one oil lease against several other interests, but crowning fortune or utter bankruptcy and ruin were in the scales," David Hartwell remarked. "As it is we can bring nothing home to Acheson, we have not a shadow of proof to connect him with Jake

Brower's activities; and the tales of dead men, unsubstantiated, do not stand in a court of law. I represent here in Texas some of the Wall Street operators who are in touch with his affairs in a confidential way, and I have kept the wires hot for the past two days. The tide has turned against him and the man is on the rocks at last! This motor tour was a blind; he was lying low for a time, granting himself a sort of moratorium, but when he stopped here and stumbled across oil he saw his chance and plunged. Then he was in mortal fear lest, at the last moment, these children should discover the wealth which had lain unnoted because it was never looked for, knowing that with such security it would only be a matter of days or even hours before they could obtain enough capital to cover the outstanding notes many times, and so with his back against the wall he made terms with Jake!"

"We'll never know how he established communications with him, I suppose, nor how he found that Sim Moser was yellow and would act as go-between," Lee observed.

"I think we can figure that some of his hirelings circulated among the riffraff of Dexter, greasers and such, and soon got in touch with Jake's spies or sympathizers," the attorney replied, rising. "If you're ready now, my boy, I'll call Wes and

one of the others to help tote you in, for we have those papers to go over, and I must leave on the first train in the morning."

"Garry and I can carry him," Pete volunteered. "Lord, but I wish I'd had been here for the big show! Garry has all the luck!"

Left alone, Susanna cradled one knee in her clasped hands and stared up at the stars, which were beginning to twinkle in the velvety sky. What would the next day bring forth? A miraculous change had come in the last few magic hours, but the greatest change of all had come in her own heart. The Circle Six was saved, the future was assured for all of them, and yet despite wealth and all that it would bring the years stretched before her empty indeed.

Sylvia loved him, of course. That could be the only explanation of her resentment and despair at his departure. She had never known a man in her limited circle who had not succumbed to her charms and she had builded air castles which had tumbled about her ears. Garry had understood, he had been willing to return and make amends for the harm he had all unwittingly wrought. And she——? Knowing what she knew of his heart and her own, must she stand aside?

"Someone is riding up the road." It was Garry's voice just behind her and all at once she

heard, faint and hollow in the distance but rapidly approaching, the hoof-beats of a single horse.

"From Dexter, probably," Susanna replied quietly, wondering why her heart should so suddenly flutter in her breast. "The news must be spreading since Wes sent those telegrams for Uncle Dave."

"Susanna." He seated himself beside her. "I meant to wait until to-morrow, but after what you told me this afternoon, there by the spring—now that I know you believe in me, even before you have proof—I want you to know that I have never spoken of love to a woman in all my life until to-night. I have never offered any woman what I could not give, and there has been nothing in my heart to bestow until you came to me!"

"Please!" She rose to her feet and stood swaying with one hand upon the porch railing. "Oh, I wish you hadn't! It is impossible, there is always—Sylvia."

The hoof-beats were louder now, pounding along the road toward the gates, but neither heard.

"Sylvia?" he repeated. "That foolish little girl? Susanna, this is more than quixotic, it is insane! I should never have spoken, God knows, but to-day I saw, I knew——! Susanna, do you think I shall let you go for a spoiled child's whim? I have loved you always, I think; even before I

knew that you really existed I loved the image of the woman who might be you, and waited for her. Have I found you only to lose you?"

The horse swerved in at the gate and clattered up the drive and Susanna gasped:

"Sylvia!"

"Yes, Sylvia!" A girlish figure sprang from the saddle and whirled up the steps to her sister's arms. "Oh, Susanna, where have you been? Why did you go away like that? I thought I should die these last two days when they wouldn't let me come home or tell me anything except that there'd been a fight between our boys and Jake Brower's outfit and that Jake was dead and his dreadful gang broken up! I should have gone crazy if it hadn't been for Harold!"

She had not seen the man standing in the shadows and Susanna kissed her very gravely.

"We were not sure yet that the roads were quite safe for you, dear. You should not have come alone so late——"

"But Harold is away—he'd gone to Mammon City to get me some new phonograph records and hadn't got back—and one of the boys from the Triangle Four came with a story about oil being found here and that we were all rich! I—I just couldn't wait! Sue, it isn't true!"

"Yes, dear. You can have everything in the

world that you have always wanted." The wistfulness in her tone was lost upon the younger girl.

"Everything!" she cried ecstatically. "Oh, Sue, pinch me! I want to be sure I am awake! Now we can go to London and Harold can buy a partnership and maybe sometime he'll have a title —I mean, be elevated to the peerage! Sue, how would you like to have a sister who was a lady?"

" 'Harold'?" Susanna held her at arm's length and her own heart seemed to stop for a moment, then beat like a wild thing struggling for freedom.

"Yes, Mrs. Bentley's son. Don't you remember him?" Sylvia laughed a trifle self-consciously. "He was transferred from the Galveston branch to the main London office, you know, and he's just home on a visit. He—he wants me to go back with him and now—oh, Sue, it's too good to be true!"

"But, Sylvia,—what of Mr. Chanler?" Sue's eyes were stern, but her voice trembled a bit as she asked the question.

"Mr. Chanler? I—I don't understand——."

"You don't understand! Have you forgotten what you told me that night before I went away? Do you know where I went? It was to New York, to bring back the man who had hurt you so that he might make reparation."

Sylvia's face went white as she listened. Then Garry stepped forward out of the shadows.

"Miss Sylvia," he said gravely. "Will you tell your sister what I have done?"

"Oh, good gracious!" Sylvia gasped. "I didn't —I never——! Sue, how could you! I only meant that I—I——! Oh, I was angry because I had made a little fool of myself and I don't know what I said, but whatever it was, Susanna ought to have known better than to pay any attention! I'm ashamed to death!—And I'm engaged, too! What will Harold say!"

She broke down sobbing and Garry squared his shoulders, glancing at Susanna, who stood as though turned to stone.

"Then you will permit me to congratulate you and at the same time exonerate me from the charge of having offended you?" He spoke laughingly, but there was a buoyant thrill in his tones.

Sylvia looked at him with tears in her eyes.

"Of course! I was a bold, forward little cat, and you were splendid, just like a big brother! Oh, what have I done!"

Susanna bent swiftly and kissed her once more.

"The greatest thing in the world for me, my dear!" she whispered softly and turned to Garry.

"O-oh, well!" Sylvia observed after a pause.

"I—I'm glad! I said he was like a splendid, big brother, but I thought you went after him for me!"

"But you don't want me, little sister!" Garry's hand was holding Susanna's very tightly. "You have Harold, you know, and Susanna——?"

Susanna smiled into his eyes.

"I've got my man!" she said.

THE END

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